

ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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NEW stories
presented by
the master
of **SUSPENSE**

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December 1972



Dear Reader:

The Pilgrims of Plymouth have the credit for originating the custom, and I will observe it in part by giving thanks that we are able to meet the likes of the following fictional miscreants in all safety, with naught but the printed

page to fear—I think.

However, each is quite singular in doing his own deed; and from Carol Russell's aberrant television star in *Three Plus Three Equals Murder* to Clark Howard's schemers in the novelette *The Bitter Pill*, you have ample opportunity to see what I mean. While we carve the bird, a number of other things are severed in this month's new stories.

So I trust you will join me in gratitude that while we (probably) will be spared an actual encounter with those personages who walk and stalk in these pages, we may enjoy the bountiful harvest of their creators' best works.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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As one might expect, the habits one displays in public are at least revelatory of one's ratiocinative processes.



Three + Three

I'M GOING TO KILL YOU, you slimy little creep! Get ready to die!"

Arthur Winston narrowed his eyes and pulled his hand out from under the bed covers. Slowly and deliberately he squeezed the trigger. Pow! A single shot ripped into his enemy's head. The man slumped to the floor in a graceful, fluid motion, and then lay still. Arthur turned him over with a nudge of his foot and spat on the dead man's face.

If the television audience could see him now, they would give him an award for ridding the world of that piece of filth.

The sound of the doorbell interrupted his fantasy. Arthur sat up and listened. By straining, he could

make out his wife's voice over the New York traffic outside the window. Miriam was talking on the intercom system to the foyer. She had arrived home a few minutes earlier and looked in on him, but he'd wanted to go over his plan again, and so had pretended to be asleep. In a minute or two he heard the low rumble of a man's voice at the front door of the apartment.

Now what? he wondered.

He got out of bed, put on a brocade robe and slid his feet into leather slippers. He paused in front of a full-length mirror and struck a pose of haughty elegance. Then he opened the door and walked down the hall to the livingroom.

"I'm sorry, my husband is

asleep," Miriam was saying to the stranger. "I just got home myself, so I don't know anything about it."

"What's going on, darling?" Arthur asked from the doorway.

Miriam hurried over to him and he put his arm around her. She stiff-

a round face and his black eyes darted everywhere, missing nothing. He was wearing one of those gray summer suits that aren't supposed to wrinkle, but do; it gave him a shopworn look.

"I've enjoyed your TV show for

Equals Murder

ened ever so slightly and moved away an inch or so. "This is my husband," she said. "Detective Brandt, Art. I thought you were asleep."

Detective Brandt? Arthur was puzzled.

"The doorbell woke me," he said, and turned his attention to the visitor. The man was about thirty-five, Arthur judged. He was stocky, had

years," the detective said. "My wife watches you every day."

Smiling modestly, Arthur walked over and shook his hand. "Thank you. Forgive my appearance, I was in bed. Please, sit down." He motioned to the sofa.

Detective Brandt sat, gingerly, as if he were afraid to soil the handsome velvet of the sofa. "I'm checking out your phone call," he said, and glanced at his notebook. "You called at eight-thirty-five and said you had heard gunshots."

"Two officers were already here," Arthur said. "I told them everything."

"There was a burglary in the apartment building next door at about the same time," the detective



THREE PLUS THREE EQUALS MURDER

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explained. "I thought there might be a connection between your gunshots and the burglary. That's why I came on over here. Now, if you wouldn't mind telling *me* what happened—"

"It's very simple. I was in the kitchen, and I heard three shots."

"How far away, would you say?"

"Not very far away—I suppose they might even have been next door. They were fairly loud. It's pretty quiet around here at night; and one can't hear the traffic noises in the back. Come, I'll show you." Arthur led the way.

"You're sure it wasn't just a TV program?" the detective asked.

"It was not," Arthur said with asperity. "I know the difference. And it wasn't a car backfiring, either."

"How far apart were the shots?"

"Bang-bang—and then bang."

"All right, Mr. Winston. Thank you. If you can think of anything else, I'd appreciate a call."

Arthur nodded. "Now, if you don't mind—I'll have to take a sleeping pill to get back to sleep."

"Sorry about that," Detective Brandt said.

At the front door Arthur gave him a courteous nod. "Happy hunting." He shut the door after him and turned to Miriam: "Where were you tonight—at the club again?"

"Yes, till about nine. Sorry I

wasn't here, though. I missed all the excitement. I went out to dinner with Hazel afterward." Miriam had taken to spending several evenings a week working out at a health club.

"You probably worked up such a good appetite that you put on more pounds than you can take off in a week."

"Don't be silly. I had a steak and a salad. Hardly any calories at all."

"And how many martinis?" A note of irritation was creeping into his voice, but he couldn't help it.

Miriam shrugged. "A martini helps me relax, so I can sleep."

Arthur moved toward the kitchen. "Why don't you take a warm bath? I'll make some hot chocolate for you. That might help you sleep."

"That's a good idea." She disappeared into the bedroom and Arthur took out a saucepan and the milk and the cocoa.

Too bad this was necessary, he told himself. If Miriam hadn't started deceiving him, they could have gone on just as before. Arthur prided himself on having a good, solid, modern marriage. No real problems. Oh, of course, he was much less interested in sex now than when he was younger, but Miriam didn't seem to mind. True, she indulged in a little light flirtation now and then, but she had cer-

tainly never had an affair before. Arthur was sure of that.

He lit the gas burner and poured some milk into the saucepan. From his robe pocket he took a capsule, separated the halves and emptied the powder into the pan of milk, then added some cocoa and sugar. When he heard the water draining out of the bathtub he poured the chocolate into a mug. After tossing the gelatine-capsule halves down the disposal, he carried the mug into the bedroom, where Miriam was getting into bed.

"Here you are, my darling."

She tasted it and wrinkled her nose. "It's bitter. Didn't you put any sugar in?"

"Just a little. I thought you were off sugar." Arthur slid into bed beside Miriam. "Come on, drink it down. I just took a sleeping pill and it's about to hit me."

Miriam drained the mug obediently. "Good night."

"Sleep tight." He leaned over to kiss her, but she turned away from him and flipped off the switch. In the darkness he smiled.

Before long Miriam's breathing told Arthur that she was sound asleep. He waited a few minutes before getting out of bed. He had already laid out his clothes; now he picked them up, took a small suitcase from the closet, and tiptoed into the bathroom, where he

dressed quickly. From the suitcase he took a bushy gray moustache and a gray wig, rather long and full at the neck, with heavy sideburns. These he fixed in place with spirit gum. There! Now he looked like a middle-aged hippie.

Next he removed a battered black wide-brimmed hat and a dirty tan raincoat from the suitcase. After putting them on and adjusting the hat at a rakish angle, he set the suitcase back inside the closet and stealthily left the apartment. Once on the street, he walked briskly to the Lexington subway station.

Detective Gordon Brandt turned his key in the lock and pushed his front door open. He could hear the television set playing in the bedroom. Ellen, his wife, was watching Johnny Carson. She was an invalid, had been in a wheelchair since her accident about fifteen years earlier. Gordon greeted her with a kiss and went to the kitchen to get a can of beer. Another hot night, the air barely stirred in the apartment. Ellen probably wouldn't be able to sleep.

Gordon took his beer and sat down in the dark livingroom. Something about Arthur Winston disturbed him. Something wasn't quite right. Gordon tried to analyze it, but it was like dissecting the wind. The man certainly seemed repu-

table enough; he'd been in the public eye for so many years that his name was virtually a household word. The Arthur Winston Show was the trickiest game show on TV. His contestants almost never solved the puzzles he put to them. That was what made the program so popular: Winston came across like such an arrogant character that millions tuned in every day to see if anyone could get the better of him, but this seldom happened.

Gordon lit a cigar and leaned back in his recliner. Maybe he was joining the crowd, he told himself. Out to get him. Okay, let's look at it objectively. Why couldn't he accept the possibility that a celebrity like Winston might hear gunshots and phone the police?

On the other hand, why had nobody else mentioned hearing any shooting? The patrolman on the beat had heard nothing. Winston's wife hadn't been at home, but what about the neighbors? Gordon knew the shots weren't connected with the burglary in the next building—the thief had been caught a few blocks away; he was well-known to the police, and he never carried a gun. Besides, Gordon had checked the apartments in Winston's brownstone and the buildings on either side. No one had heard anything. Of course, it was possible that the tenants were all watching

TV programs or soundly sleeping.

"What are you doing in here, in the dark?" Ellen wheeled her chair into the livingroom.

"Just wanted to think a bit, honey."

"Big case?"

"No, just a puzzling one. Probably not important at all. By the way, I met one of your idols today. Arthur Winston."

"Really? What's he like?"

"Oh, about the same as he is on TV, except that he looks older. Must be fifty, at least. Pretty egotistical, self-centered, knows it all."

Ellen smiled. "You really liked him, then."

"His wife was there, too," Gordon continued, paying no attention to the interruption. "She's a gorgeous dish. A lot younger than he is."

"She's a model, you know," Ellen said. "Used to be on TV; on his show, in fact. She introduced the contestants and presented the prizes—things like that."

"That's why she looked familiar. I'd forgotten."

"Can you tell me about the case? Or would you rather not talk about it?"

"There's nothing much to it. Winston heard somebody shooting a gun outside his kitchen window, and called the precinct house. Nobody else heard the shots, though,

but that's not unusual, in New York." He paused to relight his cigar and then sat chewing it and frowning.

"Okay, what's bothering you, then?" Ellen asked at last.

Gordon grinned. "You know me too well. There's something fishy here. I can smell it. You know what it is?" He got up and started to pace, waving his cigar to punctuate his thoughts. "It's Winston and his wife. They're not *right* together. Something between them; I could feel it. They're like—a happily married couple that aren't as happy as they want you to think they are. You know, putting up a big front today, but tomorrow they'll file for divorce." He grinned again. "Wonder if I should hire out as a clairvoyant?"

Ellen said, "I'll read the vital statistics tomorrow and let you know."

Gordon looked at his watch. "Hey, it's after one o'clock. Let's go to bed. I can't solve any more mysteries tonight."

"I didn't know you'd solved any," Ellen said, and he gave her chair a playful shove.

During the subway ride downtown Arthur reviewed his plan one last time. He was supposed to be at Barry Lewis' Greenwich Village apartment at midnight. Using a phony name, Arthur had told Barry

on the phone that he'd like to hire him as musical director of a night club, and that he'd bring a contract for Barry to sign. He had disguised his telephone voice in a high nasal twang he'd perfected during his days as an actor on the strawhat circuit, long before radio and television had made him a famous personality.

Arthur smiled in anticipation of Barry's recognition. *The poor slob has no idea I'm onto him*, he said to himself, chuckling. *He thinks he's made a fool of me. Well, he'll find out who the fool is, once he reads that contract.*

The train pulled into the Astor Place station, and Arthur got off and cut over to Waverly. Barry lived in a renovated brownstone with dimly-lit halls that smelled of cabbage. Arthur sniffed scornfully and pressed the bell. The door opened at once, as if Barry had been standing with his hand on the doorknob.

"Barry-baby! How are ya?" Arthur clapped the younger man on the shoulder.

Barry Lewis was a small, wiry man with a thin face and anxious eyes which focused on Arthur for a second, then moved jerkily down his frame in apparent disbelief. A frown was fixed on his forehead. "Mr. Walters? Come in, won't you?" Barry's voice was sur-

prisingly resonant for a man so slight.

Arthur Winston stepped inside the livingroom and shut the door. The utter squalor of the place depressed him, but the sight of Barry, dressed in a frightful fuchsia shirt and a pair of blue slacks, offended his eye even more.

"Drink?" Barry gestured toward a makeshift bar on top of a bookcase. A bottle of bourbon and several glasses stood there.

"No, thanks. Let's get on with the business." Arthur sat down on the sofa and took the papers out of his breast pocket. "Here's the contract. You'd better read it. I don't want you signing anything blind."

Barry glanced at the contract. "Seems to be—hey, wait a minute. What's this? What are you trying to pull? Who are you, anyway? And what's all this about Miriam Winston?"

Arthur leaned back and looked at Barry without speaking. He just smiled.

Then Barry got the point. "Clever," he said sarcastically. "What am I supposed to do, laugh?"

Arthur stood up and drew on a pair of gloves. "'Tain't funny, McGee," he said in his own voice. "You're supposed to say you'll be a good little boy and give my wife up." He slipped his hand into the

raincoat pocket. It closed around a gun.

Barry snickered. "It wouldn't do you any good if I did, pal. You're all washed up with Miriam anyway. Don't you know that?"

Arthur brought the .25 caliber automatic out of his pocket and pulled back the slide. "I'm sorry you said that," he said softly as he reached for the volume control on a portable radio on an end table and turned it up.

Barry's eyes were fixed on the gun. "Wait a minute—what d'you think you're doing?" he cried. "Put that thing down!"

Arthur calmly aimed the weapon at Barry's head.

"No—don't—please!" the small man whimpered. He ran into the bedroom, dodged around the bed and headed for the closet. Arthur followed him and wrenched the closet door open. Barry was cowering on the floor. At the sight of him Arthur almost laughed. Then Barry leaped out at him, grabbing Arthur's gun hand. The first shot went wild. Arthur managed to get free of Barry's grasp and brought the automatic down level again. Barry ducked and scurried into the bathroom, but before he could slam the door. Arthur got off another shot. This time the bullet caught Barry in the shoulder. He staggered backward against the bathtub, cry-



ing out painfully in protest.

"Shut up, damn you!" Arthur hissed. "Die like a man!" Taking deliberate aim from the doorway, he fired at the fuchsia chest. Barry went down on his knees. There was a look of bewilderment on his face. Then he slowly fell forward into the

bedroom and his dulled eyes closed.

Arthur put the gun back into his coat pocket and made a cursory search of the apartment. The roll-top desk, the bureau, the kitchen drawers yielded nothing about Miriam. In the closet Arthur saw a dozen large boxes on the shelf

above Barry's meager wardrobe. He took them down one by, one and rifled their contents. In the fourth box, among a mass of papers and snapshots of women, he found a packet of letters addressed to Barry in Miriam's handwriting.

Arthur pocketed the letters and emptied some of the boxes onto the floor. *Good. Now to get out of the filthy place.* He gave Barry's body a nudge with his foot. The musician did not move. His eyes were half-open now and glassy. Arthur felt for a pulse beat. There was none. Careful not to get any blood on his gloves or coat, he searched Barry's pockets and found his wallet. There was a small photograph of Miriam in it. He removed this, and as an afterthought took the currency—twenty dollars—from it and dropped the wallet onto the floor. Then he picked up the contract from the livingroom floor where it had fallen when Barry took flight, and tiptoed out of the apartment and down the smelly hall to the outside door.

The street was deserted. Arthur put his hands in his pockets and started for the subway. *Damn!* He'd forgotten about the gun. In the shadow of a doorway he paused long enough to remove the bullet clip. The gun itself he dropped into the sewer; he knew it could never be traced to him, because he had

bought it through a magazine ad years ago and had never applied for a permit. At the subway station he walked to the rear of the platform and tossed the gun clip inside the tunnel opening when no one was looking.

The train came in a few minutes. Arthur took a seat at the front of the car and scowled out the window at the black tunnel. He was annoyed that he'd had to use three shots to kill Barry. One was all he'd planned to fire—and then the stupid jerk had to go running around the apartment and make things difficult. It would be just his luck if that detective noticed the coincidence.

Unaccountably, he found that his hands were trembling. *I've got to get hold of myself,* he thought. *Forget that whole scene. It's over.*

In a few minutes he was back at 86th Street. Hunching his shoulders and pulling his hat down to hide his face as much as possible, he walked quickly along the quiet streets. About a block from his brownstone he made sure no one was approaching, then took off the raincoat and hastily shoved it down into a trash basket. Almost without missing a step he hurried on to his apartment.

Miriam was still asleep. He undressed quickly and stuffed the wig, moustache, hat and gloves into the suitcase in the closet before climbing into bed. It was a quarter to

one. The entire operation, starting with the phone call to the police, had taken just over four hours.

The bedside phone rang. Gordon Brandt jumped for it before it could waken Ellen. She got little enough sleep as it was.

"Hullo," he growled into the mouthpiece.

"Gordy? Mike Silver here." Mike was a homicide detective on the graveyard shift at the 23rd Precinct. "They're giving 'em to us in threes now."

"Huh?"

"Just saw your report on the guy that heard three gunshots last night. This morning they found another guy with two bullets in him—and a third bullet in the wall."

Gordon picked up the phone and carried it out into the hall. "Yeah? Where?"

"Waverly Place. In the Sixth."

Gordon laughed shortly. "I doubt there's any connection. My guy heard the shots on 87th Street."

"Yeah, I know. Funny coincidence, that's all."

"Is that what you woke me up for? Thanks a lot."

"Just thought you'd get a charge out of it," Silver said affably.

"Sure. If you get any other flashes of inspiration, be sure and call me."

Gordon hung up the phone and

padded back to bed. Seven-thirty. He could sleep for another hour.

Across town, the Winstons' clock-radio came on with a blast of rock-and-roll music. Miriam groaned and reached for it without opening her eyes, her fingers fumbling for the volume knob and finally turning it down. Arthur watched her stretch her legs and back and arms and caught the expression of hostility when she opened her eyes.

"Ugh," she said. "I feel like I took the sleeping pill, not you."

"Didn't you sleep well?"

"Oh, sure. Like a top. My head's still spinning."

"I have a bit of a sedative hang-over. You're probably just having sympathetic pains."

"Is that what you call them?" Miriam sat up and lit a cigarette. "I thought you had to have sympathetic feelings to have sympathetic pains."

Arthur grunted sourly. "Very funny. Mind if I use that on the air?"

"It's better than some of the quips you come up with!"

Arthur got up. "I'll take my shower first. I've got to get to the studio by nine or so today." He was about to add, "Some fan mail to answer," but thought better of it. Miriam was obviously in one of her sar-

caustic moods. She'd be sure to have something caustic to say about his fan mail.

When he came out of the bathroom after showering and shaving, Miriam was doing calisthenics. The eight o'clock news was just coming on.

There was no mention of Barry Lewis' death until late in the program. Arthur was tying a half-Windsor when he heard: "Band-leader Barry Lewis was found dead in his Greenwich Village apartment by a neighbor early this morning. He had been shot twice, in the shoulder and chest. The apartment had been ransacked, leading police to believe that Lewis might have surprised a burglar in the act. No gun was found."

Miriam had stopped to listen at the mention of Barry's name. Arthur watched her in the mirror as her eyes widened with shock and the color drained from her face. He heard her give a little gasp, and a feeling of tremendous satisfaction surged over him. He could hardly keep from smiling.

The newscaster moved on to a commercial, but Miriam sat still. Her eyes were brilliant with tears. She had never looked more lovely, Arthur noted. She'd really miss that creep. Tough.

He put on his jacket and buttoned it. "Aren't you going to make

any coffee this morning?" he asked.

"It's already made. While you were in the shower." Miriam rose and crossed to the bathroom.

"Are you going to the club tonight?" he called.

"No—I don't think so."

"Good. See you when I get home, then."

She closed the bathroom door, and he whisked the suitcase out of the closet and quickly carried it to the front door and left it just outside where he could pick it up before Miriam had a chance to see it and wonder what he was doing with it. He'd have to get rid of the hat and wig, maybe put them down the incinerator in one of the nearby apartment buildings. The letters he still had in his breast pocket. He wanted to read them before destroying them.

Arthur turned back then, went to the kitchen, poured himself a cup of coffee and drank it standing up. Everything was going very well indeed.

The late morning traffic was so dense that Gordon Brandt had to park two blocks away from the Winstons' apartment. He might just as well have left his car at the precinct, except that he'd come from downtown. For the past two hours he had been examining Barry Lewis' apartment. Even though

Gordon worked out of a different precinct, he had been pulled off his regular duties and assigned to investigate the burglary aspect of the Lewis case; and Gordon had discovered something very interesting. Maybe a coincidence, but it warranted further questions.

He rang the doorbell. No answer. He rang again. After about two minutes Miriam Winston came down the stairs. She hesitated for a second when she saw him, and then opened the door for him. He noticed that her eyes were red.

"Oh, Detective Brandt. Hello. I'm afraid my husband isn't in right now."

"Actually, it's you I wanted to see."

She hesitated. "Well, I was just going out, but it can wait. You'd better come in."

"Thank you." He followed her up the stairs and into the livingroom.

"Have you found out anything about the gunshots my husband heard?" she asked.

"No. Nothing. But something else has come up that's very interesting."

"Oh?" She didn't look particularly interested.

"A man was shot last night down in the Village. Perhaps you heard about it. It's been on all the news-casts. A musician named Barry

Lewis." He watched her carefully.

"Oh, yes, I heard it on the radio." She seemed a little perplexed. "But how is that connected with those shots? You certainly don't think—"

"No, ma'am, we don't know of any connection. But you knew Barry Lewis, didn't you?"

"Well, I—well, yes, I met him a couple of times—at night clubs where he was playing, you know."

"Yes, of course. That probably explains it."

"Explains what?"

"How he happened to have your name in his address book. Actually, it was your initials, M.W. But I recognized the phone number. The only funny thing is—" He stopped, frowning with concentration.

"Yes?"

"The other women in his address book were all girlfriends—ex-girlfriends, I mean. He had a lot of pictures of them in a box. Newspaper clippings, snapshots, letters, and the like." He noticed the worried look in her eyes. "No pictures of you, though. I guess you never gave him one."

"Um—that's right," she said hesitantly. "Why should I?"

"Well, you know, he must've been a likable guy, to have so many girlfriends, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes. Yes. Very charming." Her lower lip trembled.

"Upsetting, isn't it," Gordon said

sympathetically, "to hear about a good friend's death like that—on the radio. Must have been a terrible shock to you."

Miriam nodded. Her large eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry," Gordon went on. "I shouldn't be bothering you at a time like this. Thoughtless of me."

Miriam tried to smile. "That's all right."

"Mind if I use your phone?" He looked around for it.

"Of course. It's over there." She indicated a table behind the sofa.

Gordon picked up the phone, turning his back to her, and dialed WE 6-1212. While the operator was giving the weather forecast, he quickly unscrewed the mouthpiece, spotted the little microphone and replaced the mouthpiece again. "Thank you," he said into the phone and hung up.

"By the way," he said to Miriam, sitting down again, "your husband was in radio for quite a long time before TV, wasn't he?"

She made an obvious effort to pull herself together and speak calmly. "Oh, yes, years."

"What was he—an announcer?"

"Among other things. He also acted in a lot of radio plays. And before that, he was an engineer. That's really how he got his start in radio."

"I see. That's interesting." It was

more than interesting, he realized. It might explain how Winston knew enough to bug the phone.

"You were in TV yourself, weren't you? On your husband's show?"

She looked surprised. "Yes, I was, as a matter of fact. For a while."

Gordon smiled at Miriam and stood up. "I've taken up enough of your time. I'll catch Mr. Winston some other time."

"He's taping a show today, if you want to see him at the studio." She gave him the address and saw him out.

Arthur Winston smiled contemptuously as the last of Miriam's letters burned itself out in his ash tray. Now those feeble attempts to put her passion on paper were lost to literary history. The press would doubtless have a field day with the rest of Barry's amours, but at least the Winston name would not be dragged into the scandal.

He emptied the ash tray into the wastebasket. So much for "love."

The telephone rang. It was the guard at the information booth downstairs. "Mr. Winston, I have a man here who wants to see you. Mr. Brandt. Okay to send him up?"

Arthur scowled. Might as well see Brandt here as at home. "Oh, all right."

In a few minutes Gordon Brandt

appeared at the door. He sniffed. "Burning the evidence?" he inquired cheerfully.

Arthur gave him a sharp look. He hadn't realized that the odor of the burned letters still hung in the air. "Some—ah—papers were too close to the ash tray and got burned. But you didn't come here to talk about burning papers, did you?"

"Well, I don't know," Gordon said with a half-smile. "Were they important?"

Arthur waved his hand airily. "Oh, just some mash notes. I get them all the time, you know." He sat down at his desk and motioned Gordon into a chair.

Gordon nodded. "The price of fame," he said sympathetically.

Arthur regarded him coldly. "Well, what can I do for you today?"

"I've questioned your neighbors, but nobody else heard any shooting last night."

"Really."

"We've established that there was no connection with the burglary next door. I wondered whether you've thought of any other details that might help us?"

Arthur shook his head incredulously. "Don't you fellows have anything more important to do with your time? No muggings, no million-dollar burglaries, no murders?"

Gordon smiled sheepishly. "Plenty of muggings and burglaries, but no murders today—at least, not in my precinct."

"Well, then . . ." Arthur said pointedly.

"Speaking of murder," the detective continued, "did you know Barry Lewis?"

"That two-bit horn-player? Never actually met him. Now if that's all . . ."

"Thank you. That's all I wanted to know."

Arthur stood up. "I'm afraid I haven't been much help to you."

"You'd be surprised," Gordon said.

What an insufferable man! Arthur thought as he shut the door behind the detective. As long as people of that ilk were running the Police Department, a man could get away with murder.

The street lights had just come on when Gordon Brandt rang the Winston bell again. It was the second time that day, and his partner, Ed Nielsen, was with him.

Arthur greeted them coldly at his front door. "I hope this will be brief," he said. "We have dinner reservations." Miriam was getting her coat from the closet.

"I'm afraid we'll have to hold up your plans for a bit," Gordon told them. "There are several important

points that need to be cleared up." They all went into the livingroom and sat down. "I think you said, Mr. Winston, that you had never met Barry Lewis," Gordon continued. "Am I correct?"

"That is what I said. But I'd hardly call that important."

"Well, you see, there's a funny thing. My wife's an invalid. She's got nothing to do all day but look at TV. She's watched your show for years. You're very good at constructing puzzles, aren't you? Takes a real talent, a clever mind. It occurred to me that a man as clever as you would probably use that ability in everything you do. I daresay your whole life reflects that same brand of cleverness."

He got up and ambled over toward the windows. "Sorry, but I can't sit still for very long. Think better on my feet."

"Well, now. Here we have two unrelated facts. You hear three gunshots. Several hours later, Barry Lewis is shot to death. Shot three times, actually—though one shot misses him, it's still three shots. Now, that could be a coincidence. Looks like it. Especially since you say you didn't know him. However, my wife tells me Barry Lewis was on your show. You know, as a substitute for your regular bandleader. So I checked with the network. The program department has a record

of it. Now do you remember it?"

"If he was, I don't remember anything about it," Arthur said beligerently. "That's an asinine assumption—"

"It was while Mrs. Winston was a hostess, or whatever you call it, on your show. About a year ago. That must have been where *you* met Barry Lewis, wasn't it, Mrs. Winston?"

She nodded. Gordon turned to Arthur. The television star was giving his wife a look of open hostility.

"What's this all about?" Arthur demanded.

"I was—involved—with Barry, Art," Miriam said in a low voice. "I'm sorry. I should have told you a long time ago."

"That—toad?" Arthur's words were dipped in venom. "Really, Miriam, I would have thought you'd have better taste."

"News to you, is it, Mr. Winston?" Gordon asked.

Arthur shot him a withering glance. "Of course it's news! You don't think I'd stand for *my wife* having an affair with that crumb if I knew about it, do you?"

Gordon strolled over to the telephone and picked it up and casually unscrewed the mouthpiece.

The microphone was gone.

He raised his eyebrows and looked up to find Arthur's gaze fixed on him. A slight smile tinged

the corners of the famous Winston mouth.

"Something wrong, Mr. Detective?"

Gordon replaced the mouthpiece. "You have a tape recorder?"

"Of course. You're free to examine it—*after* you get a search warrant."

The detective drew the document from his pocket. "Here you are." He handed it to Arthur. "Now I'd like to see your tape collection."

Arthur opened the record cabinet and indicated a large stack of tape boxes. "Have fun. I have hundreds more, when you're finished with these."

Ed Nielsen knelt in front of the cabinet and began spot-checking each of the tapes on the player.

Miriam looked from one detective to the other in bewilderment. "I don't understand," she said. "What are you looking for?"

"Evidence," Arthur said crisply. "They are stupidly trying to implicate *me* in the murder of your-lover." He pronounced the word with distaste. "As if I'd even stoop to touch that filth!"

"You think *Art* is guilty? But he can't be. He was here, in bed, asleep. He took a sleeping pill, remember? He told you that last night."

Gordon shook his head. "No, Mrs. Winston, he said he was *going*

to take one. But that was just part of his alibi, to prove he was here when Barry Lewis was murdered."

"But what about the gunshots?" she countered. "It was just a coincidence that somebody was shooting a gun off last night, and that Arthur heard it. You wouldn't even have been here, later on, if that hadn't happened first."

"Believe me, Mrs. Winston, nobody was doing any shooting last night—at least, not around here. Mr. Winston made all that up so that he could get the police here to witness the fact that he was home in bed with his sleeping pill. It was a brilliant ruse, because it gave him a chance to slip out of the apartment later, when everyone would think he was asleep."

"But if Art had gone out during the night, I'd have heard him. I'm a very light sleeper. And I didn't take a sleeping pill."

"Sure of that?" Gordon persisted.

"Of course! I can't stand the way they make me feel—the next-day." She said the last words very slowly as a look of suspicion flashed across her face. "Art!" she cried. "You gave *me* the sedative!"

"Don't be so stupid!" Arthur Winston retorted. "You'll believe anything these flat-footed idiots say, won't you? If you had an ounce of gray matter, you'd know they're simply trying to trap you! They're

using you to try and break me down!"

"You don't have to insult me!" She turned back to the detective. "If I thought he really did kill Barry, I'd help you convict him!"

Arthur clucked his tongue. "Temper, temper, my dear. Unfortunately, Mr. Detective, your conjectures mean nothing. You can't place me at the scene of the crime, can you? Your case is pure supposition. Now, if you're finished with us, my wife and I would like to have some dinner. Sorry you can't join us." He strode toward the front hall. "Come, Miriam."

She hesitated, and in her brief moment of indecision, Gordon saw his chance.

"If you were never at Barry Lewis' apartment, Mr. Winston, where did you get the letters your wife wrote him?"

"My letters?" Miriam said in a choked voice. "Where are they?"

"Mr. Winston burned them in his office. We found them in his wastebasket. Now they're in the police lab, being reconstructed."

"Art!" Miriam gasped. "That

means—you really *did* kill him!"

Arthur laughed, a short ugly snort. "That cockroach thought he could take you away from me—and not pay for it! What could you possibly see in him?"

"You wouldn't know!" she blazed. "Barry made me feel like I was the most beautiful and most desirable girl in the world. He really knew how to treat a woman. That's something you'll never know!"

"You're not a woman, you're a dime-store mannequin. You have as much feeling as a zombie. You and that little shrimp deserved each other!"

Miriam flung herself at him. Before Gordon could stop her, her fingernails had dug deep grooves in Arthur Winston's famous face.

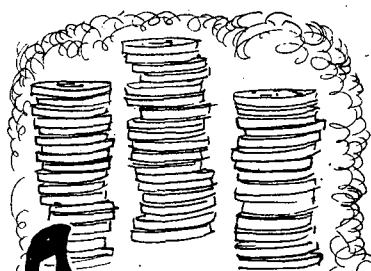
Arthur grabbed her wrists and held her away from him. "Slut!" he muttered.

The two detectives separated them. "The game's over," Gordon said. "Arthur Winston, I am charging you with the murder of Barry Lewis. You have the right to remain silent, and—"

"No way," said Ed Nielsen.



If the birth of a sucker occurs every minute, there may be little time for many others.



Give-and-Take

I'D BEEN in Reno for a week without winning a thing except a smile from a cocktail waitress. Of course I hadn't been playing anything, either; only a sucker bucks the house percentage in places like Reno. I'd been window-shopping the casinos, occasionally pulling the lever on a dime slot machine, looking for the type of mark from whom I make my living.

I returned to my hotel room early one evening after a leisurely

dinner and an excellent floor show. I unlocked my door and closed it behind me, then paused with my hand on the light switch. The odor of fresh cigar smoke was strong in the room, and I don't smoke cigars. I swallowed hard as my legs suddenly felt weak.



by Dan J. Marlowe

GIVE-AND-TAKE

19

"You're late, sonny," a strange voice said from the darkness. "Put on the light."

I put on the light and saw one man sitting on the edge of the bed, smoking a cigar, and another in a chair near the window where he had a view of the parking area into which I'd just driven. I'd never seen either of them before.

"Hi, fellas," I said with an attempt at bravado I was far from feeling. There was no artillery in sight, which was slightly comforting. The man in the chair had a lantern jaw and blue jowls, despite a close shave. "You should've let me know you were coming and I wouldn't have kept you waiting," I added.

"We enjoy our little surprises, sonny," Blue Jowls said. "Right, Hank?"

All my life people have called me "sonny." I'm 32, but I don't look it. I'm only five-six, 140 pounds, with a round, freckled face. The men in the room looked as though they outweighed me by a hundred pounds apiece.

Neither man seemed to be in any hurry. Both acted as though they held all the cards despite the illegality of their presence in my room.

I reached casually into my jacket pocket and took out my cigarettes. Neither man seemed perturbed when my hand disappeared from

view. Cops, I decided. Only plain-clothes cops should be so far out of line and as relaxed about it.

I felt better, though. Cops are like insects. They can be irritating and cause a lot of inconvenience, but nothing they do is apt to be fatal. That was a big step up from the instant I'd stood in the darkened room with my hand on the light switch.

I lit a cigarette and sat down in the chair under the reading lamp. "What's on your mind?" I asked Hank, the cigar smoker.

"You are," he said. Both men had voices raspy enough to remove lacquer from furniture. "We've been giving you some thought, sonny. Been in town a week, haven't you?"

"About that," I agreed.

"And you've been a busy little bee. Making the rounds of the casinos, night after night. Looking things over. But doing no gambling. You kind of got us to wondering what you were doing here."

"So we had a girl in one of the lounges snap your picture, an' we put it on the wire," his partner took up the litany. He pointed a sausage-like finger at me. Even from across the room I could see he needed a manicure. "You're a cardsharp, sonny. Correct?"

"I play a little cards," I admitted.

"We wouldn't want to hear that you roped any customers from one

of the casinos," Blue Jowls said emphatically.

"I play with professionals," I said with dignity.

Hank raised a shaggy eyebrow. "So? Like George Mellon?"

"George Mellon?" I echoed.

"An Oliver Hardy type who travels with a muscleman and a card mechanic. You were in the Coral Lounge at the same time they were the other night. We've had an eye on them, too."

"Honestly, fellas, I'm here on a vacation," I pleaded.

They both got up and walked to my chair. I felt like a midget looking up at their height and breadth. "Keep your nose clean, sonny, and I do mean clean," Hank said. "We'll be watching."

They moved past my chair and went out the door. I watched them through the window as they went to their unmarked car and drove away. The Reno security forces certainly had good antennae. What I had to do now was make a quick score, because they weren't going to let me hang around town indefinitely.

I removed a can of tomato juice from the mini-fridge in the tiny alcove-kitchenette and poured myself a glass. I drank it thoughtfully. Was it possible the law had bird-dogged a mark for me? An Oliver Hardy type who traveled with a muscle-

man and a card mechanic . . .

I set my alarm clock for 1:00 a.m. and stretched out on the bed for a nap. When the alarm woke me, I showered and shaved, dressed in my conservative meet-the-public dark suit, and drove to the Coral Casino.

The tables were getting a big play. There was even a pair of high-rolling Texans in ten-gallon white hats at one of the dice games. All of the seats at the twenty-one tables were taken, and people were standing two and three deep waiting for a chance to sit in. The huge room buzzed with the nervous chatter common to gambling rooms. I saw my cocktail waitress friend busily delivering drinks to the tables. She gave me a smile and a wave.

I walked into the lounge. It was intermission, and there were plenty of seats at the bar. When the bartender served me the highball I ordered, I swiveled my stool away from the stage behind the bar and looked over the people at the tables in the lounge. Two cute-looking girls were sitting alone; and I eyed them appreciatively. It wasn't surprising to find them in the lounge rather than in the casino. Their type doesn't gamble with money.

I had just finished my drink when three men entered the lounge from the casino. A fat man with a loud-checked sport coat was in the lead, and two inconspicuous types in

business suits followed him: Oliver Hardy and two Stan Laurels. The fat man was pouring a stack of hundred-dollar chips from one hand to the other. There are more ways of advertising than buying space in a newspaper.

They sat down at an empty table fifteen feet from my bar stool. The fat man—George Mellon, I was sure—kept up his chip-juggling act for a time, then dropped the chips into a pocket of his loud sport jacket. He began sizing up the lounge as I had previously.

I beckoned to the bartender for a refill, and I removed a roll of hundreds from my pocket and peeled the top one off slowly. The bartender stacked the bills from my change in front of me, and I left them there. I've been known to do a little advertising too. In the next few minutes I took out my roll again and counted it in sight of the group at the table. I had \$3,700 in hundreds plus a few twenties and tens.

I sipped my drink and waited. If the plainclothesmen's descriptions were accurate, someone was almost sure to approach me. Oliver Hardy—George Mellon—would be calling the signals, but who would carry the ball?

Sure enough, the business suit nearest me disengaged himself from the group and walked to my stool.

"Say," he began, splitting his face to show off capped teeth, "don't I know you from somewhere?"

Well, clever opening gambits *are* hard to come by. "Why, no," I said solemnly, "I don't believe so."

"I could swear we've met," he said quickly. "At a party, maybe? L.A.? Or New York?"

"San Francisco, possibly?" I said.

"I'll bet that's it," he said heartily. He held out his hand. "I'm Terry Sweeney."

"Nick Sattler," I said, using the name I'd given the cocktail waitress. I gave his hand a quick shake.

"Oil's my game," he said.

"Real estate's mine," I countered. "Care for a drink?"

"Thanks, but why not join me and my friends? You're alone, aren't you?"

"Yes. My wife went back to the hotel early."

"Fine. I'm sure I'll remember where we met."

I drained my glass and picked up my money from the bar. Terry Sweeney took my arm and led me to the table. "I'd like you to meet an old friend of mine, Nick Sattler," he said to the pair waiting there.

They smiled and nodded, opening their hearts to the new arrival in a true show of western hospitality. It was touching.

"George Mellon," Sweeney said, beginning the introductions, and I

shook hands with the fat man. It was like taking hold of a mass of warm bread dough.

"And Paul Rudzik," Sweeney continued. "His friends call him Ape."

With good reason, I thought. He was a burly type with a flat, stupid-looking face. There was a bulge at his left armpit that wasn't his spare handkerchief. A shoulder rig is the easiest to get at from a sitting position, like at a card table.

I pulled out the vacant chair and sat down. Sweeney ordered a round of drinks, and the group went into its song and dance, exchanging a rapid crossfire about oil leases, mineral rights, tax-loss corporations, and short-term capital gains. I hoped my expression was conveying the proper amount of respect.

After ten minutes of it, Rudzik signaled the waitress for another round. Mellon offered me an expensive cigar he removed from the breast pocket of his sport coat. "What line are you in, Nick?" he inquired.

"Real estate," I repeated, waving away the cigar.

"That should be interesting." He was encouraging me to talk further.

"Oh, it's okay," I shrugged, "but there's no quick turnover, and taxes are confiscatory." Only a phony brags about the money he's making.

"Perhaps you should diversify," Mellon suggested. Obviously he was a type who didn't believe in fooling around. With only a ten-minute come-on he was already into his pitch. "Investing in a few blue-chip oil leases would help to broaden your tax base."

I shook my head. "No, I guess I'll stick with what I understand."

"I have some choice leases I'd be willing to let a friend of Terence's in on," Mellon persisted.

"That's very nice of you, Mr. Mellon," I said earnestly. "I appreciate the offer, even though it doesn't interest me."

Rudzik had held up his end during the big-business dialogue, but he'd fallen silent once the ad-libbing began. He leaned toward me. "What brings you to Reno, Mr. Sattler?"

"The gambling," I said innocently.

"The gambling!" all three chorused. I could see Mellon mentally kicking himself for overlooking the direct approach.

I tried to look sheepish. "At times I have an embarrassing tendency to take risks," I said. "I enjoy games of chance, so once a year my wife and I come to Reno for two or three weeks, and I get it out of my system. That way I'm not tempted to take flyers with my investment capital."

"Very sensible," Mellon commented. "Which games of chance do you—ah—prefer?"

"Oh, I like them all," I said brightly. "They're exciting—craps, roulette, twenty-one, all of them. I guess poker is my favorite, though." My tone fairly dripped enthusiasm.

"It's a great game," Mellon said drily. "Except for the casino's rakeoff."

"That's right," Sweeney chimed in. "In the long run they get it all. Private games are much better. Now, you take the four of us here. We could go upstairs to my suite and have a nice, quiet little game without that bloody house chop."

"That's a great idea," I beamed. "I was beginning to think this would be a wasted evening." Three pleased smiles showed around the table. It makes a man feel warm inside to know he's brought such pleasure into the lives of others. I glanced at my watch. "I'll meet you at the side entrance in five minutes," I said, and dashed from the table before any of them could make a move.

In the casino I found the friendly cocktail waitress and took her to one side. I gave her a twenty-dollar bill and told her what I wanted her to do.

"Are you sure it's all right?" she asked with a troubled look. "You won't get hurt or anything?"

Women have a tendency to mother me. "Just do this favor for me," I said with my very best smile.

"Well, if you're sure you're not going to get into trouble . . ."

I pressed her hand and walked away.

Mellon and his cohorts were waiting for me at the casino's side entrance. "What was the disappearing act all about?" the fat man asked coldly. No professional likes the idea of losing contact with a mark once the connection is made.

"I wanted to call my wife and let her know I might be later than usual, but the phone booths were all busy," I explained. I turned to Sweeney. "I'll call her from your room."

They exchanged glances. They weren't happy about my calling anyone, but if I was going to telephone, they certainly preferred it to be where they could hear what I said. "Come on, then," Sweeney said.

We took the elevator to the fifth floor. Sweeney removed a key from his pocket and opened the door of 515, a luxurious-looking suite. I went directly to the telephone in the sitting room. While I waited for the switchboard to answer, Sweeney cleared a table and pulled it away from the wall. Rudzik arranged four chairs around it, and

Mellon came in from the bedroom with several unopened decks of cards in his pudgy hands. He tossed them onto the table.

The switchboard operator came on the line, and I gave her the number of the phone downstairs by which I had instructed the waitress to stay. The room became quiet. None of the group wanted to miss my conversation. "Sorry to wake you, dear," I said cheerfully when the waitress answered. "I'll be a little late." I reached over to the table and picked up one of the decks of cards, tossed it into the air, and caught it again. "I'm working a little deal with some businessmen here." I winked at Mellon. He smiled dutifully at my joke.

"You will be careful, won't you?" the waitress asked anxiously. "I keep thinking I shouldn't have let you do this."

"At the Coral Casino, room five-fifteen," I said. "But I don't want to be bothered unless that wire comes from Jamieson."

"Room five-fifteen," she repeated.

"I love you, too," I said, and hung up.

My new friends came to life when I cradled the phone. Rudzik and Sweeney took seats to the left and right of my chair, leaving Mellon opposite me. Since Rudzik was the gunman described by the two

cops, and looking at Mellon's pudgy hands, I opted for Sweeney as the card mechanic. That gentleman produced a tray of multicolored chips from a drawer in the table, and his partners brought out rolls of greenbacks.

I put my roll on the table in front of me. "Table stakes?" I asked.

Mellon pursed his fat lips. "That's a friendly game," he said.

I nodded, but if that was his idea of a friendly game, I'd be curious to hear his description of an unfriendly one. Sweeney acted as banker. He exchanged our currency for white, red, and blue chips to which he assigned ten, fifty, and hundred dollar valuations respectively. He still had gold chips left in the tray. These boys ran no small-time operation.

Sweeney broke the seal on a deck of cards, riffled and shuffled them, then wheeled them around the table, faceup. "Dealer's choice, first ace deals," he announced, and gave the ace to me.

The instant he picked up the cards I knew all I needed to know about Terence Sweeney. For the remainder of the evening he was due to get the bulk of my attention. I scooped the cards together, not too clumsily, squared the deck, and shuffled. Having located the cards I wanted, I riffle-stacked the deck to give Mellon three kings. These

deadfalls usually followed a pattern, but I wanted to be sure. I offered the deck to Sweeney to cut. He tapped the top card. That simplified matters.

"Draw," I said. "Jacks or better. Ante ten." I dealt the cards. Rudzik passed, Mellon passed his three kings, as I expected, and Sweeney passed. I opened a red chip with a pair of queens, and everyone stayed. Rudzik took one card and folded his hand as soon as he looked at it. Mellon drew three, having thrown away one of his kings. Sweeney drew two. I kept a jack kicker with my pair of queens and took two cards. I paired the jack to make two pair.

"Bet a hundred," I said, tossing a blue chip into the pot.

Rudzik had already thrown in his hand. Mellon called me, and Sweeney raised me two blues. I raised him the same. Mellon called, Sweeney called, and I spread my cards in front of me. "Queens and jacks," I said. They both pitched their cards into the discard pile, and I raked in the chips. Mellon, of course, had broken up a winning hand. The fish is supposed to get a bite of the worm before the hook is set.

"You really came on strong with that two pair," Rudzik commented, getting ready to deal the next hand.

"I always win the first one," I said. "It's a superstition of mine." I

loosened my tie, took off my coat, and draped it over the back of my chair as though I were settling in for a long stay.

"Same game," Rudzik said. My new hand was a bust, nothing higher than a ten. Mellon opened a red chip and I stayed and drew one card. I threw in my hand and they made a show of fighting it out. Mellon took a sizable pot with three aces. I saw Sweeney sneaking a look at my discarded hand to see what I'd drawn one to. After seeing it, he had to figure I was the biggest idiot they'd ever reeled in.

I won the next two hands with everyone pouring in chips freely. The second one, with Sweeney dealing, saw two pair stand up for me again. I smiled to myself and eyed the chips in front of me. I was over a thousand dollars ahead.

When it was my deal again, I shuffled and squared the cards and offered them to Sweeney for the cut after I made an arrangement. This time he cut the deck. With my left hand I tossed a blue chip into the center of the table. "Let's sweeten this one," I said. While my voice and the looping movement of my arm distracted attention, I performed a one-handed annulment of Sweeney's cut, restoring the deck to the position I'd set up.

I dealt quickly, keeping the boys busy capturing cartwheeling cards.

I knew that even if they'd suspected me, instead of figuring I was the world's prize fool, it would have taken a good man to know that some of the cards were coming from the bottom of the deck instead of the top.

I gave Mellon four sevens, confident he'd keep them this time. The free ride should be just about over. I dealt myself three nines. I didn't know what Rudzik or Sweeney had, but barring a miracle; it didn't matter. Rudzik passed, and Mellon was quick to open for two hundred. Sweeney stayed, and I raised four hundred. Mellon had a whole bunch of blue chips in his hand, but he raised me back only another four hundred, evidently afraid of freezing me out.

Sweeney stayed again, and I raised back. Mellon re-raised after Rudzik stayed. Sweeney hesitated but finally threw his chips in. I called, because I was afraid that if I raised again Sweeney would fold, and I wanted him concentrating on his hand instead of what I was doing with the cards.

Rudzik took two cards. Mellon took one and made a big production out of sneaking a look at it as though he needed it. He was hoping I had three of a kind and that I figured him for two high pair. Sweeney took one card. "Not even the right color," he muttered in disgust,

folding his hand. I took two cards, and I could see Mellon relax. He was sure the situation was under control.

It was, indeed, because one of my draw cards was the fourth nine. Sometimes my good fortune is amazing. Mellon opened the betting with four blues. Sweeney was already out, and I raised six hundred. Rudzik hesitated, and Mellon gave him an infinitesimal headshake. Rudzik threw in his hand, although reluctantly. Mellon raised me a thousand. I raised him back the balance of the chips on the table in front of me. He saw me with chips and cash after apparently deciding it was too early in the game to send me to my check-book.

I turned my cards over. "Two pairs of nines," I said nonchalantly.

The fat man's plump features crumpled like wet cardboard. He slammed his hand into the discards as I pulled in the pot.

"Cards are running high," I remarked.

No, one said anything. Mellon bought chips from me from another roll of bills taken from an inside pocket. Rudzik shuffled the deck. I sneaked a look at my watch. Twelve minutes to go. I had it; now all I had to do was keep it.

There were two quick passed hands, and the deal came to Sweeney.

ney. Rudzik and Mellon leaned in over the table in involuntary anticipation. Sweeney shuffled the cards ten seconds longer than necessary. I knew this deal was supposed to be the first ax stroke. Mellon gave the deck a perfunctory cut, and Sweeney annulled it. He wasn't the best, but he wasn't all that bad. My first four cards were spades, the fifth a diamond. Rudzik opened happily. Mellon raised, Sweeney and I stayed, and Rudzik raised back. Everyone called.

"Cards," Sweeney said, reaching for the deck in front of him.

I had my right hand in the pot, making change for two blue chips. Withdrawing my hand, I struck the cards and scattered them on the table. "Sorry," I apologized as Sweeney's mouth tightened. "I'll take one." Sweeney picked up the cards slowly. He had lost his arrangement, and I knew the draw cards were coming on their merits.

My one-card draw was the ten of spades. That *was* luck. Before my interference with the deck, Sweeney would have given me a spade anyway, but he would also have given Rudzik or Mellon enough to beat my flush. Rudzik took two cards, Mellon one, and Sweeney one. Rudzik bet two hundred, and Mellon threw in his hand. Sweeney folded, too. I raised Rudzik five hundred. He knocked over a stack

of his own chips in his eagerness to raise me back. Sweeney kept clearing his throat, trying to get Rudzik to look at him, but the gunman was tuned out to everything except lowering the boom on me.

We went raise-raise, raise-raise, raise-raise. Then Rudzik's chips were gone, and he called reluctantly.

"All blue," I said, showing them to him.

The expression on his face was something to see. "Beats three queens," he mumbled, then glared at Sweeney whose face was set in rigid lines. Mellon slipped Rudzik a wad of money taken from still another pocket, under the table, and Rudzik sulkily bought chips from me.

With Sweeney watching me as he hadn't since the game started, I dealt a hand on its merits. Mellon won the pot with a pat straight that scared everyone out. Rudzik's deal was passed. On Mellon's, Sweeney took the hand with a pair of aces. When Sweeney picked up the cards to deal again, I mentally earmarked a couple of thousand as expendable.

I ran the three tens Sweeney gave me up against Mellon's three kings, and I batted it at him so briskly he called me instead of the other way around. "Thought I had you that time," I said. It was a good pot, and everyone relaxed. The

train was now back on schedule.

I reached for the cards, and the telephone rang.

Before anyone could move, I leaned back in my chair and picked it up. "Room five-fifteen," I said.

"It's been thirty minutes," the waitress' voice said.

"He is!" I exclaimed, springing to my feet and knocking my chair over backward. "Did you call the doctor?" I held the phone far enough away from my ear so that the group could hear the feminine voice without understanding the words.

"I hope everything is all right, Nick," the waitress said.

"Call an ambulance!" I shouted. "I'll be right home!" I slammed the phone down and pushed my stacks of chips toward Sweeney. "Cash me in," I said. "My boy's got a temperature of a hundred and five." My suit coat was on the floor with the overturned chair. I snatched it up and shrugged into it hurriedly.

Sweeney was stalling, watching Mellon. This was the touch-and-go moment. Mellon was staring at me, and Sweeney was waiting for a signal from Mellon. "Sure hate to have to pull out when my luck's running so good," I said, yanking my necktie tight. "Let's meet again tomorrow night but start earlier."

Mellon's fat mouth looked like a wrinkled prune. No con man uses

violence except as a last resort, and I'd left him no other way to go. The belt I'd taken at their bankroll could always be construed as a last resort, of course. Mellon nodded finally, and I held my breath, hoping the signal was for Sweeney and not Rudzik.

It was. Wooden-faced, Sweeney counted out stacks of money so thick I had to split it up into three pockets.

"How about nine o'clock tomorrow night?" I asked.

Mellon nodded with seeming amiability. "Fine. Your kind of luck can't last. We'll meet here."

"See you tomorrow night, boys," I said, and rushed from the suite. I was breathing more easily by the time the elevator reached the lobby. I'd been afraid of Mellon's second thoughts. He'd still be puzzled, of course, after he and Sweeney discussed the debacle. Rudzik would have had no idea at all of what was taking place.

A line of gray was appearing along the eastern horizon as I neared my motel. I was feeling pleased with myself. A hot streak that lasts thirty minutes in a table stakes game can let a man buy a business. There hadn't been that kind of money in our little game, but I was sure I'd taken them for more than twenty thousand.

I unlocked the door of my room

and went in and closed it behind me—and paused with my hand on the light switch.

It was like seeing the same bad movie twice.

The odor of rank cigar smoke filled the room.

“Turn the light on, sonny,” a familiar harsh voice said.

I turned the light on.

Hank was sitting on the bed, and this time he had an ugly-looking gun in his hand. He stood up and walked over to me. “How’d you do?” he asked casually.

I didn’t reply.

He knotted his hand in my shirt front and picked me right up off the floor. “Would you like to have your doctor picking steel from this gun butt outta your ear?” he demanded.

“I won,” I said hastily.

“Dump it on the bed,” he ordered.

I turned out my pockets onto the bedcover. Hank raised a bristly eyebrow. “You must be good, sonny,” he commented. “Mellon is supposed to be a shark.” He picked up my money and arranged it in his pockets. Then he grinned at me. “In case you’re wondering, my partner is busy collecting whatever’s left in room five-fifteen at the Coral Casino.”

Too late, I had the picture. The two muscle-types weren’t cops at all.

How do you like a pair of con artists who set two card sharps at each other so they can get their cash out in the open and steal their hard-earned money? One of them must have run across me before, and one or both knew Mellon.

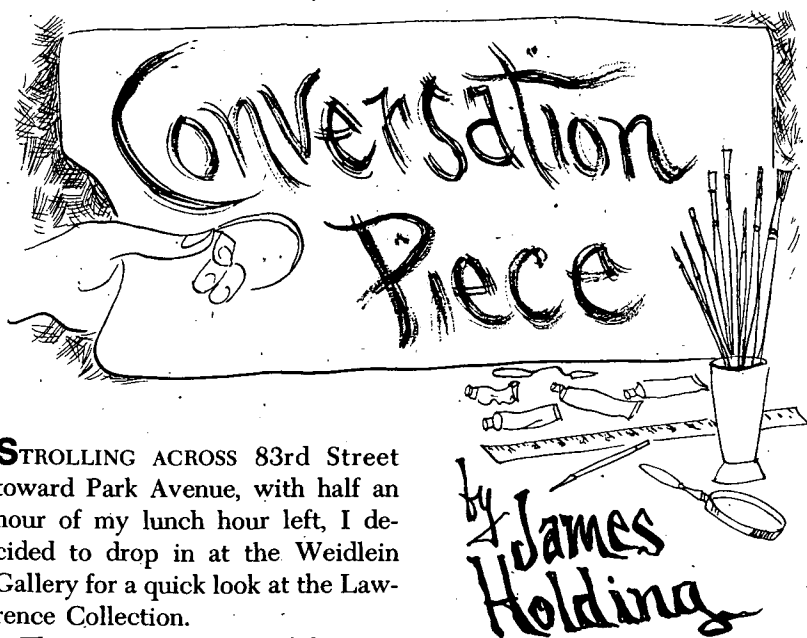
Hank backed toward the door, the gun negligently in his hand. “I’d sit for a few minutes if I was you,” he suggested. “The last time I checked, a bullet from this thing can out-hustle a man running for the cops.” He grinned again. “Although I doubt you can stand to be interviewed by the constabulary.”

He was right on both scores. I sat for a good five minutes. Then I hurried across the room and searched under my extra shirts for the rest of my bankroll. To my relief it was still there. At least Hank hadn’t had the imagination to search the motel room.

But I’ll tell you something: somebody owes me, and the next time I sit down at a card table I intend to collect without some character lobbying me over the net and taking charge.

The nerve of some people is disgusting.

Conversation, however prolonged it may be, is seldom wholly revelatory.



STROLLING ACROSS 83rd Street toward Park Avenue, with half an hour of my lunch hour left, I decided to drop in at the Weidlein Gallery for a quick look at the Lawrence Collection.

This was opening day of the New York showing, the first chance in twenty years for the public to view the fabulous 16th Century masterpieces gathered together during his lifetime by the millionaire English recluse, Girard Lawrence.

It was a raw February day in New York with the temperature plunging recklessly toward zero. I could get in out of the cold, I told myself; I could enjoy a few bitter-

sweet moments of nostalgia and, incidentally, I could satisfy my curiosity as to whether or not my favorite Flemish painter, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, was represented among the paintings which the Lawrence heirs had sent on tour since the old man died.

I paid my modest fee and entered the gallery, slipping off my over-

coat, a rather threadbare garment, as the warmth of the gallery welcomed me. It was almost like coming home again after a long absence to see the ranks of familiar canvases, ornately framed, marching down the walls of the long rooms.

There *was* a Pieter Bruegel. I found it in the third room, nestling comfortably between a brutal prison scene by Caravaggio and a Holbein portrait. I walked directly to it. I may as well confess that my heart was beating a great deal faster than even a Pieter Bruegel masterpiece would warrant.

There were perhaps a dozen other people in the room, circulating past the pictures, uttering occasional muffled sounds of admiration or criticism. I forgot them entirely—and the other pictures on the walls around me as well—as I stood contemplating the Bruegel.

The painting was titled, on an engraved brass plate below it, *The Storm*. It showed a score of small gnome-like men and women, peasants, cutting grain, playing pranks, embracing unashamedly as the fancy took them, in a half-harvested field while a storm gathered in the background. The harsh, dull coloring, the darkness of the coming storm, the somber clothing of the undersized figures, all gave the painting a faintly sinister air—human folly in the face of approach-

ing disaster. It was painted with the satirical bite and impish humor that were pure Bruegel.

A voice beside me murmured, "Pieter Bruegel?"

I nodded, noting from the corner of my eye that my fellow art critic was a short round man with bone-white hair and goatee, and thick-lensed spectacles. He carried over his arm a black overcoat which I realized with respect was lined with mink.

"Bruegel," he said again, almost to himself. "There's nobody like him, is there?"

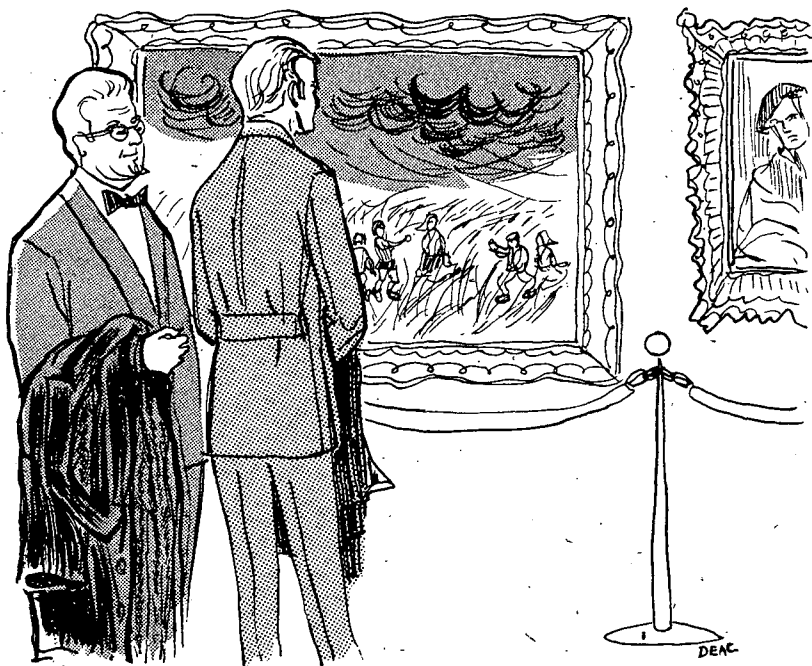
"Nobody." I was forced to agree, one enthusiast acknowledging another.

After a moment, he laughed, deep down in his throat, and shook his head. His lively eyes brimmed with amusement. "Not one of Bruegel's better efforts, I'm afraid," he said.

I was forced to agree with that, too. "Still," I said to him, "you seem to find the picture amusing."

"Pieter Bruegel is always amusing. Even his inferior work." He slanted a sharp glance at me through his glasses. "To tell the truth, I was struck just now by the thought that perhaps he painted this one while suffering from a hangover."

I bridled in spite of myself. "You think this is an inferior work?"



He backed down hastily. "Oh, I don't really know. The whole thing looks kind of hurried and potboilerish to me, if you know what I mean. Is there such a word? Potboilerish?" He laughed again. "This isn't exactly the quality of picture I expected to find in the fabled Lawrence Collection, that's all I meant. Not quite first-class Bruegel, somehow."

At his words, a sudden rush of memories swept over me, along

with an irresistible impulse to temper their sting with the doubtful opiate of confession. Perhaps it was my conscience, after all these years, demanding to be heard; or the implied slur on Pieter Bruegel's craftsmanship that set me off.

In any case, I turned to the small man standing beside me and said, "Pieter Bruegel didn't paint this picture, sir. Not by 400 years he didn't! Because I know the man who did. He was my friend and

roommate when we attended art school together in London, fifteen years ago. His name was Wellington. And he's been dead for three years now."

As soon as the words were out, I would have given anything to recall them. What a fool I was to blurt it out like that, even giving this stranger my real name: Wellington. Not that there was any danger in it now. I had abandoned that name along with my illusions when I fled from England to America after Angela left me. All the same, when I saw the look of stupefaction and shock that distorted my companion's face at my bald announcement, I was glad I had identified Wellington merely as a friend who was now dead.

I said nothing more until the man in the mink-lined coat mastered his astonishment enough to mumble, "Did I hear you aright? You are telling me this Bruegel is a forgery? A copy?"

"A copy," I said, "painted by my friend Wellington and left in place of the original Bruegel when Wellington stole it from the Lawrence Collection."

"Stole it! My word! But this is sensational, you know!" My bespectacled art lover grabbed my arm in his excitement and squinted doubtfully up into my face. He was a full foot shorter than I. "Look

here," he said, "who are you, anyway? That's an incredible statement!"

I shook off his hand, regretting my impulsive disclosure more than ever, but I told him the truth. "I'm a custodian at the Metropolitan Museum. Marvin Maynard. Which reminds me that my lunch hour is almost over and I'm due back to work." I made to leave him.

"Hold it, Mr. Maynard!" he said, seizing my arm again, with both hands this time, allowing his mink-lined coat to slip to the floor. "You can't come out with a statement like that, man, and then just walk away, you know! I want to hear the story, damn it! You owe me that, at least, after getting me thoroughly curious. Don't you? As one Bruegel lover to another?"

"But . . ."

"It won't take long, will it? Five minutes, maybe? Boil it down any way you like. But tell me, I beg of you. What do you say?" He stooped for his coat.

What *could* I say?

He drew me by my captive arm toward a cushioned divan in the center of the salon. "Come on now, Mr. Maynard," he cajoled, "when are you really due back to work?"

"One o'clock," I said.

"So you still have a few minutes. And so do I. I asked a friend to meet me here at one o'clock." He

consulted his watch. "And it's only ten minutes to." He pulled me down beside him on the bench.

I said, "Well, there's not a great deal to tell, really. A woman was responsible for the whole mess, as a matter of fact."

"Ah," he said. "That's so often the case, isn't it? Go on, Mr. Maynard."

"I never saw the woman myself, but my friend Wellington swore to me many times that his Angela was the most beautiful girl alive."

"When one is young," said my companion sententiously, "everything is beautiful. *Quant' è bella giovinezza*, as Lorenzo de' Medici so gracefully put it, eh?"

"I don't know anything about that," I said. "All I know is what my friend Wellington told me about his light of love, the beautiful Angela. Sometimes, when he'd come home to the tiny flat we shared near the Marylebone underground station, he would actually rave for an hour by the clock about Angela's beauty, her sensitive appreciation of the fine arts, her remarkable critical faculty where painting was concerned, her modesty and, above all, her admirable but aggravating chastity in a London where license was commonplace . . ." I warmed to my story. "Why, sometimes, when he would return from the National

Gallery after half a day of her company—"

"The National Gallery?" my listener interrupted me. "I thought you and your friend Wellington were attending art school in London?"

"So we were. Part of our discipline, however, was to spend some hours every week copying the masters in the National Gallery, the Tate, the Wallace Collection, striving to acquaint ourselves intimately with the techniques and coloration which enabled them to create their masterpieces. It was at the National Gallery, while Wellington was copying Bruegel's *Adoration of the Kings*, that Angela first paused to admire his skill, then scraped acquaintance with him, and finally spent many hours behind his easel, chatting with him—and inspiring him—while he worked."

"It's too bad you never met this paragon, Angela, yourself," said my companion, clicking his tongue in a deprecatory way.

"My line was portraiture," I replied. "I copied several Vandykes, Gainsboroughs and Reynoldses at the National Portrait Gallery, but never happened to visit the National Gallery while the Angela episode in Wellington's life was taking place. So I never happened to meet her. Wellington, however, soon developed an overwhelming passion

for her, as you might imagine. A beautiful young woman, a tasteful judge of painting, interested in his work, companionable, and determinedly chaste despite his best efforts to overcome her scruples. How could anyone blame Wellington for falling victim to her beauty and innocence?"

The man beside me said disapprovingly, "It's been my experience that you can't trust the ones who put on that big chastity act."

"Wellington proposed marriage to her within a week of their meeting," I continued. "But Angela, alas, rejected him out of hand. She loved him, of course, but was not prepared to share poverty with him. He offered to seek employment several days a week at a fish-and-chips shop near the art school to make a beginning toward earning an honest living for them both. This did not, predictably, present the promise of adequate security for Angela. So she turned him down, poor Wellington. He was at his wit's end, of course, until Angela herself came to Wellington with a suggestion for more dignified and remunerative employment for the man she hoped would be her husband one day. She urged him to apply for a job opening she saw advertised in the newspaper—the position of butler on the domestic staff of—can you guess who?"

"Mr. Girard Lawrence," my companion said at once, "who owned some of the finest paintings in Europe?"

I nodded. "Precisely. Wellington applied for the job forthwith, and much to his surprise, considering his lack of experience, he got it."

"Well, well."

"Once installed in his new position, Wellington was admonished by Angela—with much tender teasing, to work hard, save his wages, and they would soon be married. At the same time, she warned him not to allow his very great artistic talents to wither away from disuse, merely because he had been forced to choose between Angela and art school, as it were. You see where all this was leading?"

"I think I do, yes. She encouraged him to copy some of the paintings in the Lawrence Collection? Just to keep his hand in?"

"Exactly. In his room, at night, after the household had retired, and one masterpiece missing from its usual place in the collection would not be missed at all until it was back in place the next morning."

"Ah," said the man beside me, nodding wisely.

"Wellington was particularly encouraged to copy Mr. Lawrence's Pieter Bruegel, of course. For it was as a Bruegel copyist that Wellington had first impressed Angela at

the National Gallery, you may remember."

"And then?"

"Came a week when Wellington, on his day off, told Angela he had completed an excellent, he thought, copy of the Lawrence Bruegel; the best copy, in his opinion, that he had ever made of a masterpiece. He was looking for approbation from Angela, of course. What he got was a broad hint from her that if he'd put his copy of *The Storm* into the frame of the original Bruegel on Lawrence's wall, and would smuggle the original canvas, rolled into a tight handy cylinder, out of the Lawrence Collection into her hands, she knew a dealer who, without embarrassing questions, would buy the painting from her for enough money so that Angela and Wellington could marry at once, without all that tiresome saving of wages for who knows how many years."

The man beside me shut his eyes and wagged his head, deploring the duplicity of women in general and Angela in particular. "I suppose your friend Wellington fell for that old chestnut?" he asked.

"Of course. Poor fellow, who could blame him? He was mad for Angela—on any terms at all. He stole the Bruegel, put his copy, this copy—" I waved toward the picture before us, "into the Bruegel frame,

and turned the original over to Angela to dispose of. She took it. I don't need to tell you the rest."

"Wellington never saw her again? Nor the Bruegel original?"

"Never until the day of his death," I said. "How about that for a faithless and heartless woman?"

The man beside me stirred and sighed as I finished raking over the ashes of my long-dead fire. Then he rose abruptly from the divan and went to stand before the Bruegel once more. I joined him there.

After a moment, without interrupting his scrutiny of the picture, he said, "What you have told me certainly confirms my own first impression: that this was either an inferior Bruegel or a very superior copy. Your friend Wellington was a truly gifted copyist."

"Our instructors in art school always said so."

"Yes. And what do you imagine became of the Lawrence Collection's original Bruegel, after Wellington stole it?"

I shrugged. "Probably reposing somewhere in a collector's vault," I said, "without authentic provenance, of course, but still perfectly capable of providing great pleasure to an appreciative owner."

"You're probably right about it."

"Of course I'm right. Why else would Angela have deceived Wellington except to sell the Bruegel at

a handsome price and appropriate the money for herself?"

My neighbor said tentatively, "Perhaps we should suggest to the authorities of this exhibition that their Pieter Bruegel is a forgery?"

I suddenly felt drained, indifferent. I said, "Not me, thanks. I couldn't care less. Wellington is dead and can never be convicted of theft now. You go ahead and report it if you wish, but I'd rather not get involved, if you don't mind. The first expert in 16th Century art who strolls into this gallery will detect the fraud, anyway, never fear."

"Not so." Clutching his mink-lined coat, my fellow art buff bent over and peered closely at the Bruegel through his thick spectacles. "Remember that nobody, except old Girard Lawrence, has seen the original of this thing for more than twenty years, since he shut himself up in that gloomy old mansion and withdrew from the world." Obviously struck by a sudden thought, he paused, then asked thoughtfully, "I wonder why Lawrence himself didn't realize his Bruegel had been stolen and this copy substituted for it? In all the years it has hung on his wall since?"

I knew the answer to that one. "Wellington told me the old man's vision was very poor in his later years. He had inoperable cataracts—one reason he withdrew from

the world, as you have put it."

"Oho! No wonder, then. Anyway, this copy is so well done that it might fool Lawrence or any other expert unless it were subjected to very exhaustive tests, I should say."

"You can't be sure of that," I said.

"Of course I can be sure. I'm accounted rather an expert in 16th Century art myself, and I couldn't be certain the Bruegel was not genuine until you told me so." He produced a calling card from an inner pocket and handed it to me.

John Kincaid Husted. I was aghast. I had made my confession to the owner of the best-known collection of 16th Century paintings in America—and a widely acclaimed critic as well.

While I gaped at him, he went imperturbably on. "I do not, however, intend to expose this picture as a counterfeit. You understand why not, of course."

"Why not?" I asked.

"For one thing, to keep from getting involved, as you mentioned. For another, because you say your friend Wellington is dead, and I do not like to blacken any man's name, even posthumously. But chiefly because it would be completely irresponsible for me, a well-known critic, in all modesty, to cry 'fake' about a picture in the Lawrence Collection."

"Irresponsible?" I stammered. I was reduced, as you see, to one-word echoes.

"Certainly. Surely you see that if I point out the presence of this counterfeit Bruegel, the genuineness of every other picture in the Collection is immediately called into question? The other paintings are no doubt genuine enough. But when it comes to art forgeries, everyone has learned that there is usually more than one rotten apple in a barrel. Therefore, I intend to refrain from reporting this Bruegel. Let some other expert detect it, if detected it must be."

With a feeling of vast relief, I said, "Very thoughtful of you, sir, very thoughtful indeed. As a custodian at the Metropolitan, I realize only too well that such a scandal would make a shambles of the Lawrence Collection's worldwide tour." I glanced at my watch. "I've got to run now, honestly. I'm already ten minutes late, for it takes me ten minutes to get back to the museum. It's been a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Husted, I must say. I never miss your articles in *Art News*. And I

hope you'll believe me when I say that I wouldn't have uttered a single word about this Bruegel to you if I'd known who you are?"

"Forget it," he said, his eyes glinting behind his glasses. "I wouldn't have missed your revelation for anything." He looked beyond me. "Ah, good," he said on a rising inflection, "here comes my friend at last."

I turned. A woman was walking across the room toward us. After fifteen years, a strikingly beautiful woman still; the most beautiful woman I had ever known: Angela.

Watching her approach with the old magic still apparent in every movement, with a radiant smile that would beguile a saint, I managed to mutter, "Your friend?"

"Yes," Husted said. "My agent, actually. But my friend, too, of course." A pause. Then, in an amused tone, "Gracious! You look as though you'd seen a ghost, Mr. Wellington." He came down hard on the name.

Shaken to the depths, I turned back to him.

John Kincaid Husted was smiling.



Extraordinary, indeed, is the person whose benevolence anticipates nothing in return.



The Lamented

SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL, but in a provocative, somewhat off-center sort of way: coppery hair clipped short and close to her head; long, strong arms and legs; spatulate fingers flexing now in nervousness or perhaps because they were used to being busy; full breasts that even the black crepe dress she wore couldn't subdue; eyes the rich color of ripe black cherries.

She sat on the platform facing the vast audience, flanked by emi-

nent dignitaries from the fields of sociology and anthropology, and listened to President Horace Lee Larkin of the Exploratory Survey Society hymn her praise. She wanted to cross her legs, sprawl in her chair. She wanted a cigarette. She remained seated erect, both feet firmly on the floor in front of her, and did without the cigarette. She smiled vaguely because of all the people in the audience watching her, and a smile—a brief, brave one—would be expected of her.

“—and this dedicated woman,” Larkin was declaiming, slicing slabs of air with effusive gestures, “this feminine Ulysses, so to speak, who has so recently returned to us from her long visit to the aboriginal tribe she and her husband discovered and named, uh—” Larkin harrumphed, frowned in distress until someone behind him on the platform prompted, “*The Omegans!*”

“The Omegans!” President Larkin boomed. “Yes, Mrs. Sutherland, who has so recently returned from the Omegans to all of us, her colleagues who love her—why, this woman has shown more courage

than the lion, more determination than the beaver and more strength than the, uh, elephant! You all know how, with her husband, the late lamented Matthew Sutherland, our beloved Anna went—”

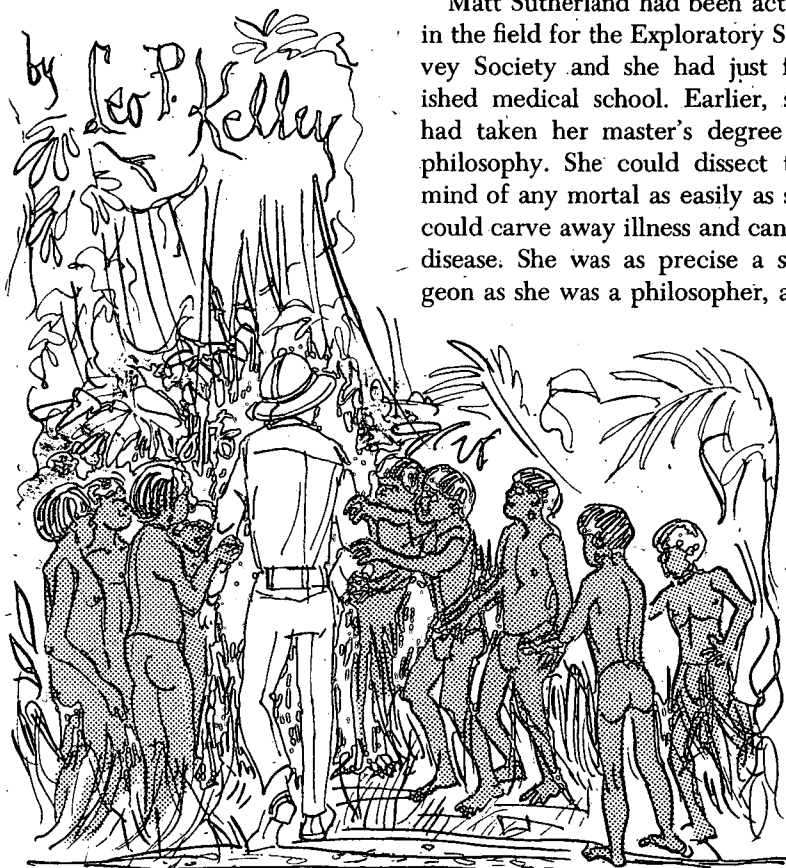
Matt, she thought. Oh, Matt!

“—out to live among the Omegans and on to her dark date with destiny!”

His name still sang within her. *Matt*. She saw again the blazing blue of his eyes and felt his body pressed against her own and, for one priceless moment, she found it impossible to believe that he was dead and lost to her forever.

They had met four years ago when she was twenty-seven and he was thirty.

Matt Sutherland had been active in the field for the Exploratory Survey Society and she had just finished medical school. Earlier, she had taken her master's degree in philosophy. She could dissect the mind of any mortal as easily as she could carve away illness and cancel disease. She was as precise a surgeon as she was a philosopher, and



Matt Sutherland was the first man she had ever met who was not afraid of her. She was grateful to him for that; foolishly, happily grateful. He made her feel that it was not a crime for a woman to have a good mind, not a sin to have such strong and capable, almost masculine, hands.

He had persuaded her to join the Society where, he said, her skills could best serve the world and some of its less fortunate inhabitants. She had joined at his urging, already hopelessly committed to him, although she had not realized it at the time.

Later, when it was announced to the staff of the Society that an expedition to one of the world's few remaining unexplored territories was to be undertaken, she and Matt had volunteered jointly despite the obvious dangers involved. Matt had made a joke about them not being missionaries, just the next best thing.

They planned their campaign with care. They saw to it that a string was pulled here, a word spoken there, and it came about that within two months they were selected to staff the expedition.

The press was delighted when their marriage was announced two weeks before their scheduled departure. The fears of certain more conservative elements of society

were assuaged as a result, although one feminist journal nastily labeled the union as "merely expedient in an outdated and decadent sense."

Their relationship during the long weeks while they tore and hacked their way into a territory where civilized men had never walked before wore an air of urgency that could not be explained in terms of desire alone. It was as if their frequent lovemaking was an act of defiance, a gauntlet flung down to challenge the beasts and jungle surrounding them. In the pristine primitiveness of the land they invaded, they slept, ate, drank, and looked at one another with eyes full of delight and wonder.

Anna was the first to notice the figures standing motionless one night beyond the reach of their campfire's weak light. "Matt," she said softly, and pointed surreptitiously.

Matt, moving slowly in order not to provoke an attack or to frighten away the people watching them from the darkness, opened one of the small cases they had brought with them. He took out bolts of brightly striped cloth and gaudy glass beads.

"Wait," Anna said to him, "I'll come with you."

"No," he said, "I'll go alone."

"You damned Columbus, you!" She laughed lightly. "You want the

honor of being the first person to make contact with a race that no one has known, until now, even existed."

"No," he repeated. "When we get back, I'll be glad to say you were the first to make contact, if you like. But I'm going alone."

She understood what motivated him. It was his deep love for her and his concern for her safety in the presence of the unknown and untested. Still, she couldn't resist chiding him. "I've braved the intricacies of Spinoza and exposed myself to more communicable diseases than I can count, and you're trying to protect me from *them*?" She glanced at the small figures staring out at Matt from the bush. "Why, they haven't even any weapons," she whispered. "And they're not much bigger than young children."

But Matt went alone, the beads and bright cloth he carried with him flashing in the light of the fire.

She watched, tensing slightly, as two of the people in the darkness reached out and took Matt's hands and began to lead him deeper into the bush. She felt fear for the first time since embarking on their expedition. She supposed it was because she didn't want to be left alone with only a campfire's flames for company. She almost called out to Matt to come back to her, but her sense of self-discipline won and she

remained silent, watching fearfully.

They brought him back to her an hour and fifty-eight minutes later. A dark people, all less than five-feet tall, hairless and bland-featured, they milled about on the edge of the firelight as she stared in horror at what they held in their hands. Then she screamed and she couldn't stop screaming until her throat was afire and saliva instead of sound escaped her lips.

Anna's attention returned to the speaker:

"The new wing of our Exploratory Survey Society building," President Horace Lee Larkin was saying, "will be named in honor of Matthew Sutherland, martyred in his service to anthropological science and sociological research. And now, dear friends and esteemed colleagues, the time has come for us all to hear a firsthand account of the Sutherland Expedition among the Omegans from the lips of our own lovely colleague. I take great pride in presenting to you at this time—Mrs. Matthew Sutherland!"

A woman whispered to her husband, "She's still as beautiful as when she left. And yet—don't you think there's something wrong with her eyes? Or is it just the awful light in here?"

The scientific assemblage was silent now, waiting for the words

about to be spoken by the intrepid Anna Sutherland. She had refused to be interviewed by reporters and it was reliably rumored that even President Larkin had been told he would have to wait for her first public announcement to learn what had happened during her long absence. Anna had returned only a week previously, after spending nearly four years among the Omegans. Search parties, three in all, had been unable to locate her during all that time.

The questions connected with her absence were many. Why had she not returned sooner? What had really happened to Matt Sutherland—and to her? All that was really known was that Mrs. Sutherland, upon her sudden and unexpected return, had stated that her husband was dead and that she had remained by choice among the Omegans.

Now the waiting members of the Society would know everything, for Anna Sutherland was striding purposefully toward the lectern.

"I want to thank you all for this very kind reception," she said quietly into the microphones sprouting like a field of cornstalks in front of her. Without further introductory remarks, she began to tell her story.

"My husband was killed by the Omegans. He went away with them

for a short time, and when he returned, he was dead."

In a steady, unwavering voice, she went on to explain exactly what had happened. When the Omegans returned to the campfire, she said, she saw that they were carrying her husband. The *pieces* of her husband, she corrected herself. She began to scream, she said, and she screamed for unnumbered minutes. Then, in despair mixed with fury, she herself went out among the Omegans. She explained that, at that moment, she no longer cared whether she lived or died.

She described how they had held Matt up to her and how her fear had gradually yielded to understanding. She began to realize, she said, that they meant her no harm.

"They simply wanted—" Her voice faltered momentarily.

"You see," she explained, after recovering her composure, "the Omegans are like children. That is, they are basically harmless and totally unsophisticated. They had never seen anyone not of their tribe before—a man with a white skin. They brought Matthew back to me hoping that—that I could fix him! I began to understand that, childlike as they are, they had simply used their primitive tools to take Matt apart in order to find out—to find out," she continued, making a visible effort to control herself, "what

it was that made such an odd creature tick!"

A collective gasp shot up from the crowd.

President Larkin raced to the lectern and put his arm around Anna.

"Thank you," she murmured. She straightened her shoulders.

"But," spluttered Larkin, his mouth working furiously, "why did you stay after what—"

"I stayed because— Please let me explain. Matt and I had agreed that, should we meet any previously undiscovered tribes, we would call them Alphans. That name, our variation on the first letter of the Greek alphabet, would, we thought, signify a beginning for such a people—an introduction to our modern world and all its wonders. Well, after Matt was killed, I called them Omegans, from the Greek alphabet's last letter—to signify an ending.

"The Omegans contract quite debilitating fevers that formerly caused many deaths among them as a result of severe dehydration. They suffer infections caused by insect bites and minor wounds. Using my

medical skills, I cured their illnesses, but I also saw to it that I, used my surgical skills on the dozen or so females of all ages in their relatively small tribe. Of course, they never suspected what I was doing to them. As I believe I mentioned, they are a most unsophisticated people. Following the death of their children who are now living, there will be no more Omegans left!" Anna concluded, her eyes blazing.

"Then," groaned Larkin, understanding swooping down on him like a great evil bird, "then you stayed to—" He released her suddenly as if she had just stung him.

"To *punish* them!" Anna screamed.

"That's—unethical!" Larkin cried. "It's *criminal*!"

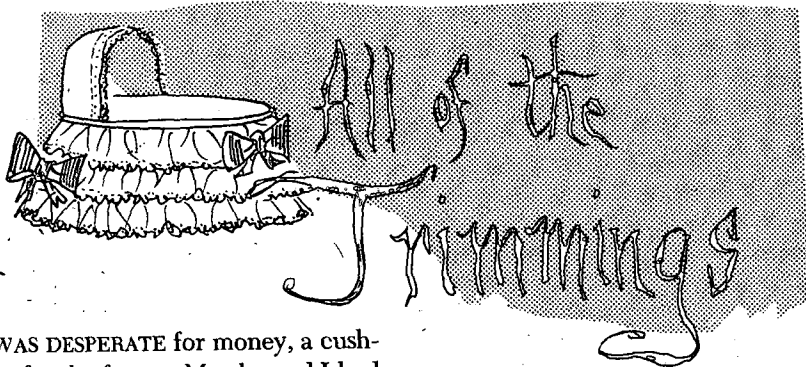
Confusion broke out on the platform and in the audience.

"Genocide!" someone shouted hysterically.

Anna Sutherland paid no attention to the shocked cries as she slumped over the lectern sobbing, remembering her beloved Matt and all that might have been.



There are times when additional garnish is definitely superfluous.



I WAS DESPERATE for money, a cushion for the future. Marsha and I had been doing okay, living hand-to-mouth on my pay check from the construction job I'd had since my parole, but there was to be another mouth to feed in another month. We were flush on Fridays, pay day, and broke the next Thursday. Ex-con common laborers aren't paid top wages, you know. That's why I planned the bank job. Marsha and I and the baby would disappear into some far corner of the world where the baby could have all of the things he or she was supposed to have, and would never know the old man had done seven of a ten-year stretch.

Marsha said, "I have just enough

money left for a bag of potato chips, a loaf of bread and a package of cold meat."

It was a Thursday and raining. No work for me on a rainy day, but when I'd come awake that morning and heard the rain, I'd known a certain relief. I didn't have to call in sick in order to make the 2 p.m. meet I'd set up with Duck and his friend.

"I don't have a dime," I lied to Marsha. The fiver in my thin wallet had to stay there until later.

She frowned slightly. "Then we miscalculated this week. One of us should have five dollars. I wonder where—"

"You're not forgetting the five I had to break at the drugstore, are you?" I interrupted quickly.

I didn't like lying to her, and I wanted to get off the subject.

"No . . ." she said thoughtfully.

"Well, why don't you scoot on

to someone else—my mother and my sisters in the old days, and now my wife.

Marsha slid into a worn trench coat. Soon she'd have a new coat, all sleek and fashionable, and we might even be able to afford a maid so that Marsha would have plenty of free time too.

She knotted a scarf under her chin and stopped at the door of the tiny flat. "This place is a mess, but with the vacuum cleaner—"

"OK," I interrupted, wishing she'd cut.

I was scheduled to meet Duck and his friend in an hour and I had some distance to travel. Her trip to the corner market was going to save me another lie. I'd leave while she was gone. That way I wouldn't have to make up an excuse about why I was going out and where I was going. I'd think of a plausible explanation while I was gone.

She went out the door. I gave her five minutes, and then I put on my torn slicker and went down the back steps of the building. Our ancient sedan coughed and sputtered and the valves sounded like someone knocking on four doors simultaneously, but finally the engine smoothed and I rolled. My next heap was to be a white convertible with all of the trimmings. The problem, of course, was going to be in explaining the sudden wealth to

down to the corner market, honey? Potato chips and sandwiches sound fine to me. Tomorrow night we'll blow a little and fix a couple of steaks, rare."

She turned her frown to the window. Between the rain sluicing down on the outside of the glass and the film on the inside, it was difficult to see and she squinted as she looked at the rain. "I thought you might go to the store for me, Jack," she said.

"The walk and the fresh air will do you good, honey. The rain won't hurt you."

Domestic errands were not my bag. Taking or picking up cleaning, dropping books into a library shoot, running to the post office substation for a book of stamps never had held lures for me. The errands belonged

by Max
Van Derveer

Marsha. It was to be a big crisis in our lives. I had been straight for eighteen months now, and it very easily might be the only way Marsha would live with me. On the other hand, she'd *have* to understand and accept; our baby was to have all of the proper rearing, also with trimmings. Perhaps Marsha eventually would learn to like the money, especially after I promised her I'd never pull another caper. The next time I'd keep that promise.

Duck and I had shared a prison cell for almost five of my seven long years inside. He'd been paroled three months ahead of me and I'd looked him up a couple of weeks after putting the walls behind me. He'd been doing small jobs, gas stations, liquor stores, an occasional supermarket. The small stuff was just his meat. Duck wasn't cut out to fashion a big job, but he staked me from one of the supermarket stickups because I had to play it straight with the parole boys for a few months—and I wanted to think, too. No five-and-dimes for me. When I poked my neck out again it was to be for a haul that'd get me leisure for a long time. All Duck said was, "When you come up with the masterpiece, Jack, cut me in, huh? I'll be around."

I hadn't come up with the mas-

terpiece quickly because I met Marsha; but now, eighteen months later, I had it, and Duck was in. He had surprised me by still being mobile. While I'd searched for him I'd figured one of his small jobs had gone sour and he probably was back in prison. Then I'd found him down in the shank of the city, still existing on meager stickups, and he leaped when I told him what I had in mind.

"You didn't forget, huh, Jack?"

"You staked me when I needed it, Duck."

"Details?"

"Later," I told him. "It's still got some rough edges. I've got to do some smoothing out. I just wanted to be sure you were available."

Today, Duck and the partner I'd told him to find were to get the details.

They sat across from each other in the booth in the dingy tavern. Each had a beer. I waved another round to the table as I slid into the booth beside Duck. I got out the precious fiver I'd been saving for this moment and spent part of it expansively, leaving the change on the table so they got the impression I knew how to handle waiters—and major operations.

"This joint you picked, Jack, ain't exactly the Palace." Duck grinned. "But the beer's cold, it's quiet, and we can talk, huh? Shake hands with

Danny Bond. Danny's never been busted, but he's experienced." Duck's grin widened. "We've pulled a couple of cuties, haven't we, kid?" he said to Danny Bond.

Bond nodded, remained silent. I figured he was about twenty-five. Everything about him looked cheap, but he appeared to be healthy and neat, and I liked the way he was sizing me up as I inventoried him. It told me something about him: he wasn't a plunger. He seemed to be a man who used a little care, picked his way. Perhaps that was why he never had been arrested. But how and why he would hook up with Duck puzzled me, because Duck was all plunger. It was why I'd been surprised when I'd found him still footloose and out of prison. Still, maybe Duck could lay his continued freedom to Danny Bond. Maybe Bond was just cagey enough to tug some reins on Duck. To me, that was good. Bond could ease my worries about Duck on the bank caper.

I put it on the table for them. I gave them all of the minute details, not that the setup was that complicated, but details were the difference between going to prison and good living. I'd plunged once without smoothing the edges, and I'd got ten years.

When I had finished, Duck was

enthusiastic while Bond sat nodding thoughtfully. I ordered another round of beer, and then Bond said, "Sounds slick, man, although I can't say I'm super crazy about being the keeper of the handcuffs at the house. I'd kinda like to go where the green goes."

"Somebody has to stay there," I said. "That's the pressure we keep on the old man."

"Yeah, yeah, I understand that part, but—"

"And it isn't gonna be all peaches and cream at the bank, Bond. Bank vaults are on clocks and that, in turn, means there's gonna be other employees at the bank when we walk in with the old man. Me'n Duck are gonna be plenty busy, keepin' an eye on everyone and cleanin' out the vault at the same time."

"So maybe we need another guy."

"I thought about it," I admitted. "But that's another cut."

Duck interrupted. He jabbed with an elbow. "Hey, let me out of here, huh, Jack? I gotta hit the Men's."

I let him out of the booth, and he said to Danny Bond, "You're in this, kid, 'cause I brought you along, and I brought you along 'cause Jack here needed a good third hand, somebody who'd listen and do as he's told. I told ya the other day

Jack'd be callin' the shots, and this ain't no time for you to be questionin' decisions. Understand?"

I saw Bond's eyes harden and his lips thin slightly as he stared up at Duck. "I was giving an opinion, man, that's all."

"They don't count in this deal, Danny. You'n me, when we do a job, you give all the damned opinions you wanna, but this one belongs to Jack. Just figure you're lucky. The man didn't hafta come lookin' for me. He didn't hafta accept my bringin' *you* along. There's other guys."

Duck ran a hand across his graying hair and lumbered off.

I looked Bond straight in the eye and told him, "There's always a certain amount of trust in a caper like this. We're gonna be dependin' on you keepin' the family under your thumb and away from telephones just like you're gonna be dependin' on us to—"

"Yeah, yeah," Bond cut me off. He lit a cigarette jerkily, flipped the match to the floor.

I decided to level with him. "I'd rather have you with me, Bond," I told him truthfully. "Duck stumbles a lot, makes bad moves, has a tendency to get excited when he needs a cool head. But I can't leave him at the house. There'll be two women there, the old lady and the maid, and Duck. . . ." I hesitated. "Okay,

when Duck got busted it was because he stopped to rape. Or maybe you know."

Bond smoked and stared straight at me. "I didn't know," he said flatly.

"We're gonna leave the house at exactly eight-fifteen tomorrow morning," I said. "Forty minutes to drive to the bank. That puts us inside at nine. That's when the clock opens the vault. We'll be out of the bank and rolling by nine-twenty, earlier if possible, but you leave the house at nine, straight up. Cut for the old sewer plant. We divide there and each go his way. Fair enough?"

"I'm in," said Bond.

I kissed Marsha and left the flat at exactly five-thirty that Friday morning, following the routine of five mornings of every week. I went down the back steps with my lunch bucket in hand, relieved that Marsha, although still distant, was in a better mood this morning. She'd been upset when I returned to the flat Thursday afternoon. She didn't understand why I had gone out without telling her I was going and she really didn't believe me when I told her that I had suddenly become restless and decided to take a walk in the rain. She didn't believe that any more than I would have believed her if she had offered such

a lame explanation, but Marsha was a forgiving person and she'd melted some by the time I left the flat Friday morning.

Downstairs, I dug the .38 out from behind the rear seat cushion of the sedan and stuck it in my pocket. The gun had been stashed behind the seat for months. I left the sedan in the bus depot parking lot downtown and went to the curb. Duck rolled up in a stolen Ford and I jumped into the seat beside him. I looked behind us as we reentered traffic. Danny Bond was immediately behind us in a stolen Dodge. We rolled out to the mansion.

We hit the Bronsons fast. We took the maid without a sound when she opened the front door. Duck and I tailed it upstairs and caught both of the Bronsons asleep in bed. The old man struggled briefly, but settled when Duck jammed the muzzle of the ancient .45 against his ear. His wife didn't utter a peep. We told the old man to dress as if he were going down to his bank and we allowed the old lady to put on a robe. Then we took them downstairs and told the maid to finish preparing breakfast. She did so under Danny's watchful eye. It was served at a huge dining room table where we ate in style. At eight o'clock, I went out of earshot of everyone else and called the time office of the construction firm.

"This is Jack Gregory, Sam," I told the time man. "I won't be there today. I'm down. Don't know what it is. My wife is taking me to the doctor later. Okay?"

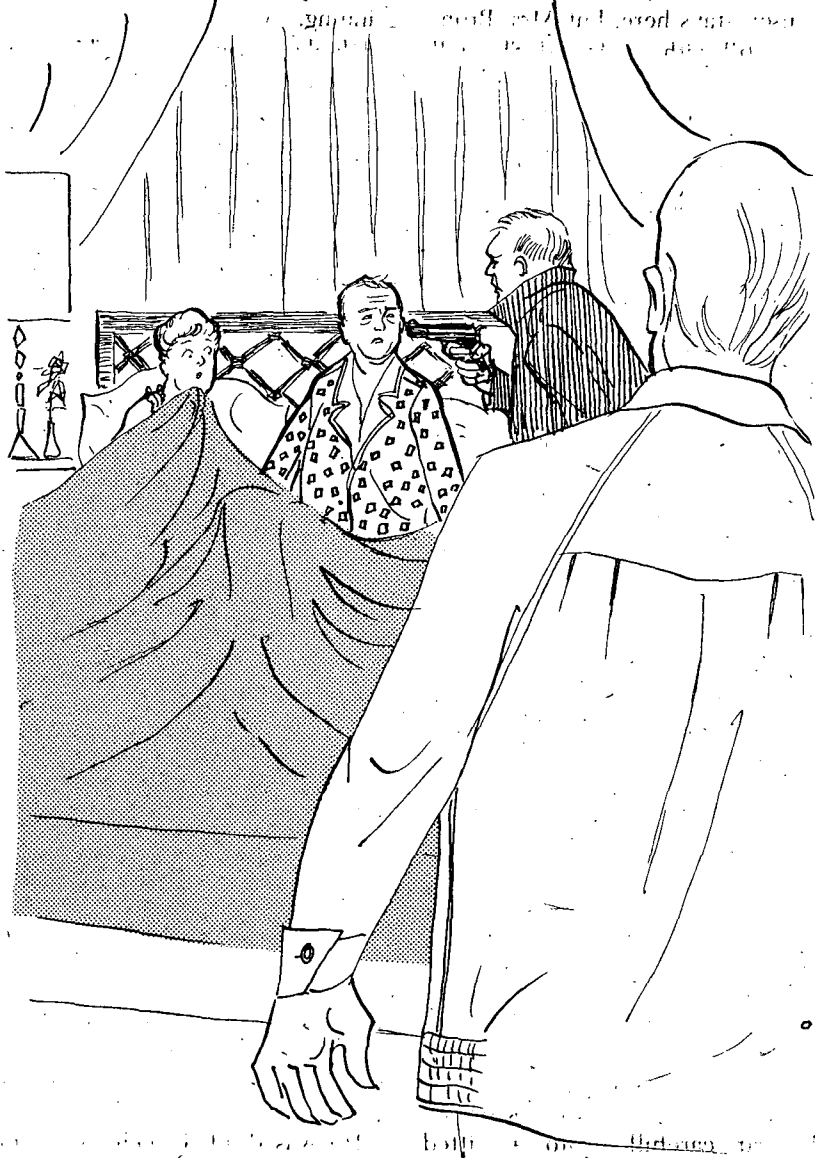
"I'll hang on to your check, Jack."

Duck and I took Bronson to his bank and walked in the front door at exactly one minute before nine o'clock. With my .38 shoved against the back of Bronson's neck, I made the announcement to the handful of employees from the entrance: "If the cops show, this man is dead. So is his wife. We have a friend at his house."

Nobody moved. Even the three uniformed bank guards who stood clustered off to my left stood frozen. We'd hit at exactly the right minute. Everyone had been preparing for the nine o'clock opening of the vast vault, but no one was quite ready.

After the vault door was opened, we put everyone on the floor, lined up, faces down, arms stretched over heads, hands out where we could see them. Duck stood over them with the .45 and as each new arrival walked into the bank he used the gun to wave them into the prone line. I took the cloth laundry bag into the vault and scooped money into it, taking only the paper money.

From the front entrance, I made



my second announcement: "Mr. Bronson stays here, but Mrs. Bronson is still with our friend. She will be for at least an hour. You people decide what you wanna do."

Then Duck and I tailed.

"Slick, Jack," Duck said gleefully as he piloted the Ford expertly along the freeway.

We had smooth sailing. We were going in the opposite direction of the heavy inbound traffic. I sat half-turned on the seat, keeping a sharp eye behind us. It looked clean enough back there—no cop cars—but I warned Duck: "No speeding, pal. We don't need a traffic bull. And watch for the exit."

"Laggard Street," Duck grunted. "I drove this two times last night. I know where I'm goin', Jack. How much you figure we got?"

"Maybe thirty, forty thousand."

"Ugh. I thought it might be more."

"Maybe seventy, eighty thou, Duck. I didn't stop to count it. Here's the Laggard Exit comin' up."

"How long you figure we're gonna hafta wait for Danny at the plant?"

"He should be ten minutes behind us, no more."

We rolled into open country along the access road. Duck turned the car carefully onto a pitted blacktop side road. "I wouldn't

wanna spill all that green," he said, grinning.

I looked behind us; nothing, no Danny Bond. "Wheel, Duck. This is the chancy part. If someone sees us rollin' along here he might get curious about why we're headin' for the old plant."

The abandoned sewer plant was at the end of the blacktop stretch. Once there had been a wire gate across the road, but vandals had taken care of the gate. Duck eased the car around the corner of one of the buildings and rolled through an opening in the brick wall. He braked in the cool shadow of the interior and got out of the car, leaving the door open. I looked around at the shadows and the cobwebs and sniffed the mustiness. The movement in the corner of my eye alerted me. Duck had taken the .45 from his trouser belt and was bringing the muzzle down on me. I fired the .38 without thought. Duck howled and went back, arms flying. I saw the .45 spin from his hand. He staggered back against a pipe and hung there briefly, staring at me as if he did not believe it. Blood spread on his chest.

Then he grinned suddenly. "Ya always was too quick for me, Jack," he said, and crumpled to the ground.

He was dead. I knelt over him, wagging my head. I'd thought

something about this way back in the beginning of my planning, only I'd figured I'd be the one to pull the drop. I'd figured just to back Duck off with the .38 and drive away before Danny Bond arrived. Duck and Bond would search for me, sure, but they'd never find me. I hadn't figured Duck might pull down on me, but Danny Bond might. He could've filled Duck's head with thoughts of extra riches. Not that Duck would've seen the riches. All Duck would've got after he blasted me was a slug in his own head from Bond.

I heard the car coming along the road and I raced to the opening where I plastered myself against the brick wall and waited for the Dodge to roll in behind the Ford. I was on the driver's side and had a clear target. Bond didn't have a chance to get out of the seat. I poked the .38 through the opening of the window and shot him before he could yell.

Instinct told me to run, put as much distance as I could between myself and the two bodies. I looked inside the car. Bond was slumped over on his side on the front seat, his face covered with blood. I saw the gun dangling from the fingertips of his right hand. The gun wasn't a surprise.

I opened the door and shoved the body enough for me to get behind the wheel. I backed out of the

building, then got the Ford outside. I put the Dodge inside again and pitched the key into the weeds. I found a handkerchief in Duck's pocket and wiped down the Dodge, hitting all of the spots I figured I'd touched. Then I got into the Ford and wheeled away from the plant. I didn't draw an easy breath until I was on the freeway and rolling back into the city.

I found a parking slot three blocks north of the bus depot and I sat slumped in the front seat of the Ford, wiping it down as best I could without attracting attention. I wasn't satisfied I had removed all of my fingerprints, but I couldn't remain in the car any longer. I got out and took the laundry bag from the floor of the back seat. I clutched the drawstrings and walked briskly away from the Ford, but all the way to my ancient heap in the parking lot I expected heavy hands to clamp down on my free shoulder.

I put the laundry bag inside and drove aimlessly for about an hour, glancing at the bag on the seat beside me and attempting to plot my next moves. I was a murderer now, but I didn't feel like I had killed anyone. Duck and Danny Bond seemed to be just a couple of guys I'd had a beer with on Thursday afternoon. It was strange. Why didn't I think about them as they were, dead and sprawled in a building at

an old, and isolated, sewer plant?

I pulled into a supermarket parking lot, braked in a stall and sat thinking. I smoked a cigarette. The gun, of course, was a link between me and the two bodies. Police ballistics could take care of that tie if the cops found the .38 in my possession. It was a stolen gun, but I had to get rid of it. Where? Here on a supermarket parking lot? No. At the construction site? We were putting up a fifty-five story office building, glass and concrete, and I was a member of the concrete gang. There would be opportunity for me to sink the .38 into what eventually would become a part of a building wall.

All right, that took care of the gun. Now, what about Marsha and the money? I didn't even know how much money, and I suddenly wanted to go off somewhere and spend the rest of the day counting and stacking piles of bills. Stupid, pure stupid thinking. I put down the temptation and sat up behind the steering wheel. I'd revert to my original plan, the one I'd had all laid out before two killings had entered the picture.

I put the laundry bag in the trunk of the sedan and drove to the construction site. Sam looked surprised when he saw me coming toward him in my hard hat.

"I don't know, Sam," I told him.

with a wag of my head. I found I couldn't look him in the eyes. "I got up feelin' lousy as hell, then suddenly I'm okay. So I came on down. What is it, eleven o'clock? You dock me for four hours, huh?"

"I'll dock you, Jack," he nodded. "Hit it. We need you today. We're runnin' behind."

I managed to bury the .38 in wet concrete during midafternoon and as it disappeared I felt a tremendous weight lifting from my shoulders. I found new excitement too. The news of the bank robbery was on the radio and the reported take was \$65,000. With that kind of dough my kid was going to get a good start.

I bought two steaks on my way home to Marsha that Friday afternoon. Purposely, I did not get the garlic or the loaf of French bread. I put the steaks and the cash that was left from my pay check on the counter before her. Kissing her, I said, "Hop down to the corner market, babe, and get French bread and garlic. I forgot."

She seemed caught up in my mood, probably because I had at least thought enough about her to stop and get the steaks. Forgetting the bread and garlic was a mere slip. After all, a girl couldn't expect *everything*.

She laughed lightly and said, "I like Fridays."

"Best day of the week, huh, doll?"

She was two minutes out of the flat and I was heading down the back steps. I brought the laundry bag upstairs, dug out the vacuum cleaner that didn't work, opened the bag and stuffed the money inside. The bag bulged more than I wanted, but I wasn't going to throw away any of that loot either. I took the laundry bag up to the roof and pitched it into a corner. I was in my deep chair, nipping at my last cold bottle of beer, when Marsha returned with the bread and garlic.

"I feel *good*," she announced.

I sipped beer. "What would you say, doll, if we just went off to Europe for a couple of years?"

"Ho-ho-ho," she said from the tiny cubicle that was supposed to be a kitchen. "Listen to the dreamer. What didja do today, rob that bank?"

"What bank?"

"The one downtown. Didn'tcha hear about it? Somebody got around \$65,000."

"Whee, that's a lot of cabbage, ain't it?"

"I wouldn't know how to act, Jack, if I had that kind of money, and that's the truth."

I found myself on the brink of leveling with her, putting it all out on the table, the murders included, and letting her digest it. Then I dis-

covered I could not. The words became lodged in my throat. I drank beer and decided I needed at least the weekend in which to figure out how to break it to her.

At five-thirty on Monday morning I kissed her at the door and turned to leave, but she held my shoulders, looked at me, her eyes mirroring happiness. "Thank you for a beautiful weekend," she said.

I felt flustered. "It was different?"

She said, "You were different, so relaxed, so . . . I don't know, Jack, but there is something different about you, even this morning."

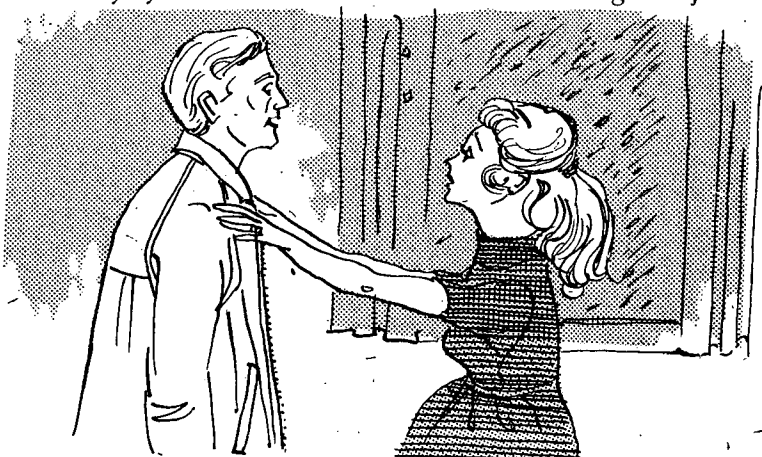
I wasn't sure why it hit me, but I said, "Maybe it's because I'm gettin' a pay raise, effective this week. Surprised?"

"Ohh, Jack!" She launched herself against me and planted a firm kiss. "I love you!" she said. "Now get out of here before I decide you don't need to go to work today."

I went, the memory of her beaming face all I could think about as I trotted down the back steps. She seemed so happy I found I couldn't even feel lousy about the lie. She'd never know it was a lie, anyway, because by Friday she'd know about the bank money and we probably would be in Paris or Rome or some other such place.

The bodies of Charles "Duck"

Reynolds and Danny Bond were found by a couple of exploring kids that Monday. One of the guys at work heard the news flash on his transistor. The cops were playing the murders as a couple of gangland slayings since Duck was an ex-con and Danny had been a guy the police had been trying to pin for a long time. The police, apparently, were not linking the killings to a bank robbery—yet.



A violent, electrical rainstorm chased us off the job around two-thirty. I drove slowly through the rain to the flat. I had to unload to Marsha. We had to start packing, get passports and anything else that was required for going to Europe to live. I didn't know the routine, but I did know we had to get moving.

When I entered the flat, Marsha left the chair by the window and kissed me lightly. "I was expecting

you," she said, "with all the rain."

"Marsha—"

"And I hope you are still in the same mood you were in all weekend."

"Yeah?"

"Because I took a tremendous plunge today," she said, giggling.

"Like?"

"I sent the vacuum cleaner out to be repaired. I called a repair shop. A man came to get it just about

twenty minutes ago. I . . . What's the matter, Jack?"

I searched for words. There were none.

"Jack?" She put her hands on my shoulders. Her expression had gone grave. "What is it, Jack? What did I do, say? If it's the vacuum cleaner, well, I thought with a pay raise that . . ."

"What's . . . the name of the shop, Marsha?" I managed.

"The Fix-It Shop," she told me.
"On what street?"
"Baldwin, 4545 Baldwin. Jack, what—"

I bolted down the back steps with her cries trailing off behind me. The sedan engine leaped alive and the worn valves clicked like I was doing eighty as I backed into the alley. I squealed tires like a kid pulling away from a red light as I headed for the street. Baldwin was six blocks over, but I wasn't sure where 4545 might be. I checked store fronts, found some numbers and turned right. The rain had become a drizzle. I wheeled five blocks and spotted the sign: Fix-It.

A young girl was alone in the place and she jerked when I entered. "Do you know anything?" she gasped. "Was . . . was Ben killed?"

"You just picked up a vacuum cleaner at my place!" I rasped, ignoring her questions.

The girl jerked again. "Wh-at?"

"A vacuum cleaner! At my place! I'm Jack Gregory! Your man just—"

"Ohhh," the girl wailed, burying her face in her hands suddenly. Then she looked up, her eyes wide. "I-I thought you were a policeman . . . Ohh, there's been an accident and Ben was driving . . . Ben and I are going to be married next week and—"

"Who's Ben?" I yelled.

She flinched. "He drives the truck! He makes the pickups and deliveries! And there's just been an accident! Mr. Anderson—he's the owner of this place—he went down there, leaving me here. But I don't know what's happened to Ben!"

It penetrated and I reached across the counter and grabbed the girl. I shook her. "Where was the accident?"

"At Baldwin . . . and 60th."

"And Ben was on his way in here with pickups?"

"Y-yes."

I made a U-turn in the middle of the block and scattered Baldwin traffic. Then I shot down to 60th. I was forced to brake a quarter of a block away. When I had elbowed through the intersection crowd, I saw the panel truck on its side, dented deeply near the rear wheel. The car, with the hood popped up and the radiator still steaming, was askew off to my right. I shot forward. A uniformed cop stabbed at my shoulder. I spun away from him.

"Out, buster!" he ordered.

I ignored him and went to the open door on the back of the panel. There was another uniformed cop inside the truck. He was squatted in paper money and looking around as if watching a rising flood. He spotted me just as the cop behind me caught my shoulder again.

"Buster, scam."

I shook off the grip on my shoulder.

"What do you want?" bleated the cop.

I almost hung myself. I almost said, "That money's mine!" I snapped my jaws together, and then I said lamely, "Ben . . . where's Ben?"

"Who's Ben?" asked the cop.

"M-my . . . son," I lied. "He was driving . . . this truck."

"He's okay, I think. They took him to Memorial Hospital. You go on over there. You can find out over there."

My eyes were riveted on the ripped bag of the vacuum cleaner at the cop's feet and I didn't turn by myself. The cop behind me turned me, put me erect.

"Where . . . where did all of that money come from?" I managed, playing my role to the hilt now.

"Never you mind," said the cop. "It's what we're gonna find out. But you hustle on over to Memorial now. You can find out about your boy there."

I raced back to the flat and shot

inside. Marsha was wide-eyed. "What's the matter, Jack?"

"How come you had to send out the vacuum cleaner?" I shouted.

She flinched and said, "W-well, you'd never get around to taking it—"

"You've got part of a pickup stub?"

"Yes . . . Sure, I signed both parts of the ticket when—Jack, what have I done?"

We had a chance. We could run. I got down our two suitcases and pitched clothing into them. Marsha pawed at me. "Jack, what is it?"

I took her out of the flat without even bothering to pick up her coat. She fell to her knees in the hallway and doubled forward, clamping her middle and groaning like she'd been shot.

"Marsha . . ." I rasped.

She went down to her side slowly and then stretched out on her back. She suddenly was very pale and her eyes were clamped down tight as her fingers worked at her protruding middle.

"J-Jack," she whispered, "I think I'm having the baby . . ."



of mothers of babies and has...
One must make certain allowances for a mother's boy.



Mother's Boy

remainder to my mother, Lilly. In the thirteen years since then, Lilly's share has multiplied and remultiplied while my own has divided and subdivided.

But after all, how long is a quar-

MOTHERS are vastly overrated in our society. A woman performs a simple biological function, for which—perhaps *only* for which—she is suitably equipped, and ever afterward claims rank and privilege in the world's most demanding union. Now, I'm as fond of my mother as any reasonable man, but when it became necessary to murder her I didn't intend to let foolish sentimentality stand in my way.

The crux of the difficulty, again, was money. When my father, Charlton Saunders, Sr., died shortly before my twenty-fifth birthday—a riding accident—he left a token portion of his estate to me and the



Ed Dumonte

ter of a million dollars expected to last?

One doesn't make casually the decision to murder one's mother. I exhausted every resource and possibility at my disposal before it became apparent that murder was the only solution. John Westmas was one of the early possibilities I tried.

Westmas has been our family banker and investment counselor since before I was born. He is a slightly built man with a full head of starkly white hair and suspiciously shifty eyes for a banker. I broached the matter to him offhandedly in his office one afternoon.

"John, my mother's advancing age has made me wonder about her competency. What do you think our chances would be of having her put into an asylum and transferring control of the estate to me?"

Westmas glanced briefly at me, then looked at the door, at a picture on the wall (a sailing ship), out the window and into a far corner of the room.

"Junior," he said, presumably to me, "in the farthest reaches of senility your mother will still be better able to handle the estate than you would the best day you'll ever know. Charlton, senior, didn't leave Lilly the majority of his estate on a whim. He did it because she was a full partner in everything they did

and fully entitled to everything he had. It was against my recommendation that he left you a lump sum at all. I suggested a trust fund giving you a regular amount you would be able to handle. Say, five dollars a week."

Westmas risked another quick look at me, checked a desk calendar, the wall clock, his pocket watch and thumbed through his appointment book.

"And if it should come to having somebody committed to an asylum, I would have to remind the competency hearing board of your venture in drilling for offshore oil."

"It should hardly be necessary, John," I said stiffly, "for me to remind you of the great many fortunes that have been made in offshore oil."

"Offshore Lake Michigan, Junior?"

Another thought took me to the office of Dr. Farley McWilliams, a bald, fat man who is eternally chewing the stub of a cigar. My introduction to McWilliams was a brisk slap on the behind, and I have thoroughly detested him ever since. The feeling is mutual.

"Frankly, McWilliams," I told him, "I'm worried about the state of my mother's health. With each passing day she becomes more feeble and forgetful. I'm afraid of

what she might accidentally do to herself: a fall, an overdose of one of the patent remedies you prescribe. I know you've been her doctor for longer than I can remember, but isn't it time we called in competent medical help? Perhaps had her hospitalized?"

The cigar in McWilliams' round face bobbed up and down a couple of times and moved from one side of his mouth to the other. Then he scribbled something on a note pad, tore off the top sheet and pushed it across the desk to me.

"What's this?"

"Name of a friend of mine." He munched the cigar some more. "He's head of the vital organs bank at the medical center. Why don't you run over and let him take out a few?"

"As to the state of your mother's health: if she ever decides to outfit a whaling ship and go looking for Moby Dick, you'd better learn to like blubber."

Well, I tried; you can see that I tried. There was no other way to get rid of Mother than to . . . get rid of Mother.

Lilly occupies a suite of rooms at the rear of an ugly mid-Twenties, psuedo-Victorian country house my father built for her in the days before Black Tuesday. A bedroom and sitting room on the second floor

overlook an old-fashioned formal garden. But it is in the library-den-office that she spends ten to fourteen hours a day reading, working and generally riding herd on the family fortune.

That was where I found her this evening.

"Good heavens, Mother, are you still up? Do you realize it's after ten o'clock?"

Mother looked up from the *Wall Street Journal*, which she reads for entertainment, and smiled at me. "If you'd been home at this hour any time in the last fifteen years or so, you would have noticed that I'm always up at ten o'clock. In fact, I sometimes go hog-wild and stay up till midnight or later."

"Well, that explains it," I sighed. "You don't know how concerned I've been about you lately."

"I certainly don't."

"Please be serious, Mother," I said sternly. "I do worry about you. You're going to have to start conserving your strength for the few years you have left. Perhaps it's time that I took over more of the burden of responsibility."

"More?"

I took Mother's paper and helped her from the chair. She walked beside me wordlessly as I held her arm and helped her up the stairs to her rooms.

"Now you get ready for bed," I

told her, "and I'll bring you a cup of hot chocolate to help you sleep."

While the chocolate was heating, I opened a box of sleeping powders Dr. McWilliams had once prescribed for Lilly and poured six of them into the carafe. The powder dissolved nicely in the hot chocolate, and when the carafe was half full—thinking again of the state of Mother's health—I poured in six more.

Mother was sitting up in bed with a book when I entered the room.

"Just making a few notes on some points Dr. Reuben missed," she murmured.

I filled a cup from the carafe and placed them both on the table beside her bed.

"Drink your chocolate and go to sleep," I said, leaning over to kiss her wrinkled brow, "and don't worry about getting up tomorrow. Stay in bed as long as you like."

I went downstairs to the library and poured myself a nightcap. Mother's safe was set into the wall behind her desk. As I stared at it, the heavy door became transparent and I could see the shelves of account books that kept track of our fortune, the cash box that held several thousand dollars of what Mother considered petty cash, the jewelry cases that had been closed and put away when Father died.

With an impatient sigh, I finished my drink and went to bed.

In the morning, I opened the door to Mother's bedroom and looked in cautiously. She was lying on her back, her silvery hair spread out against the pillow, her hands folded on her breast. There was no movement or sound of breath: From the doorway I could see that the cup of chocolate I had poured was empty. She'd had at least one cup of the chocolate, perhaps more.

I closed the door and went downstairs to make a phone call.

"Dr. McWilliams," there was a catch in my voice, "what I feared has come to pass. Mother is dead. Her poor old heart must have just given out last night. She died quietly in her sleep."

There was a long silence at the other end of the line and a sudden bang as the receiver was slammed down. When the residue of the carafe was found to be drugged I would steer the line of thought to an accidental overdose, as previously established.

McWilliams arrived fifteen minutes later. We stood together in the doorway, looking at the still form on the bed. After a moment, the corpse opened its eyes, sat up and smiled at us.

"Why, good morning, Junior," Mother said. "And Farley. Whatever are you doing here at this time

of day? Could somebody be ill?"

McWilliams dropped the stub of his cigar into a jacket pocket, brushed at his head where hair used to be, and smiled. I had never seen him smile before. I had to leave the room.

There was a perfectly reasonable explanation for it, I assured myself, dropping the spade I was working with for a few minutes of well-earned rest. The prescription was stale and had lost its effectiveness. Or perhaps sly, old McWilliams had given Mother a placebo instead of a genuine sleeping potion.

In any case, there would be no failure this time.

It was Lilly's custom to stroll for an hour in the evening before dinner. One of her regular walks was along what used to be the bridle path. At one point—this very place where I had been slaving with that damnable shovel for more than an hour—the path comes dangerously near the edge of a cliff overlooking some rather nasty rocks.

This was the exact spot, fittingly, where Father's horse suddenly spooked and reared and threw him over the edge thirteen years ago.

I took the beastly shovel into my poor, blistered hands for a final attack on the roots of some bushes that were now the only support of a three-foot span of the bridle path.

Then I filled the telltale marks of the shovel blade with dirt, patted it smooth and returned the wretched instrument to the gardener's shed.

Walking back to the house, I thoughtfully surveyed the considerable acreage Father had purchased so many years ago. Any knowledgeable contractor could quickly put up a number of fine, new apartment buildings that in three or four years would reach a condition to qualify me as a slum landlord. And then the money would begin rolling in.

The days passed slowly as Mother strolled through the gardens or down the driveway to the front gate or out to the pavilion beside the pond.

"It's a shame we don't keep horses anymore," I commented idly to Lilly one afternoon. "Still, I imagine the old bridle path is a scenic place to walk. Especially about sundown."

"You'll get an infection if you don't stop picking at those blisters," she said.

Finally, it happened. Dinner was ready to be served and Mother had not yet appeared. Leaving word with the cook that there would be an extra dessert which I would have when I returned, I set out to retrace the path Mother must have taken that evening.

The sun was well below the hori-

zon now and the missing section of the bridle path might have been no more than a somewhat deeper patch of shadow. Cautiously, I peered over the broken edge to the rocks below. The light wasn't strong enough to make out any details, but a bright bit of orange caught on a branch or outcropping of rock halfway down the cliff fluttered in the breeze. Mother had been carrying an orange jacket when she left the house.

This time I called John Westmas. He, too, was there within fifteen minutes.

"She's been brooding about Father's death, John," I told him. "Lately, I've noticed her taking long walks to the place where his horse threw him and gazing thoughtfully out over the rocks."

When we reached the place, John's quick eyes darted to the broken stretch of path, the fluttering bit of orange and the rocks below.

"I don't see her . . . body," he said. "Perhaps she survived the fall and has wandered away, dazed, looking for help."

"At her age? Fragile condition, brittle bones and all that? Hardly likely, you know."

John glanced at the rocks below, at me, at the hands he held clenched before him. Mumbling something about making a search, he started back to the house.

Mother was seated at the dinner table when we arrived.

"John, how delightful!" she said. "I've just had the most frightening near-accident and must tell you all about it. Junior, will you please go to the kitchen and speak to Cook. She has the silly idea that you've reserved all the desserts tonight for yourself."

John looked at Mother. That's all: John looked at Mother.

Enough of these subtleties.

Father used to keep a gun in the center drawer of his big wooden desk in the den. The desk was Mother's now, but the gun had remained.

She was standing at the French doors as I entered the room, looking out into the garden. She didn't hear me then, but turned as I rushed about the room upsetting chairs and small tables, pulling books from the shelves, scattering papers.

"Junior, what are you doing—have you gone mad?"

Finally, I cleared the desk with a sweep of my arm, pulled open the center drawer, took out the revolver and fired three times. Mother stumbled backward and fell across the threshold of the doors, half in and half out of the room.

I returned the gloves I had been wearing to my overcoat pocket and called the police.

"It must have been a prowler," I reported to the officers who arrived minutes later. "I got home just a short while ago and went into the study. The room was torn apart, Father's old gun was in the middle of the floor and Mother's body was lying near the French doors—as though she had been trying to run away. I called you immediately and haven't been back in there."

One of the policemen went into the study and the other stayed in the hallway with me. After a moment the first one returned to the doorway.

"Where did you say the body was?"

The room was immaculate, as usual. Chairs and tables stood in their accustomed places. Books were on the shelves in proper order. Mother's letters and papers were neatly arranged on her desk. At the French doors, a gentle breeze lightly ruffled the edges of the curtains.

"Where did you say the body was?" he asked again.

"The body?" Things were beginning to spin in my head. "Why . . . Why, the body's upstairs in her bedroom, of course. Took an overdose of sleeping medicine with her hot chocolate last night. Killed her, I'm afraid."

I turned from the first policeman to lead the way upstairs and walked

into the second one, a stone wall.

"Just a minute, sir," he said. "We were sent here to investigate a possible robbery and murder. What's this about sleeping pills?"

"What about sleeping pills?" I was indignant. "Mother hasn't used them since shortly after Father's death. Slept like a baby, she did. Marvelous constitution. Might have lived forever if she hadn't been battered to death by those rocks at the bottom of the cliff. Same way poor old Father went, you know."

I turned again to show them the way to the bridle path and saw Mother standing framed in the curtains of the French doors. That was when I shrieked.

The first officer walked over to the doorway and the other placed his hands firmly on my arms. Mother and the policeman spoke together in low tones for a few moments, glancing frequently at me.

" . . . been terribly worried about my well-being lately, poor boy," I heard Mother saying. "I'm afraid it may have affected his balance."

Mother and the policeman finished their conversation and he reached for the handcuffs at his belt. Mother shook her head.

"That won't be necessary," she said, "I can handle him. But when you call the number I gave you, tell Dr. Grenshaw to send an extra attendant with the ambulance."

The policemen pushed me to a chair, seated me in it and left the room. Mother paced the floor with a sadness and indecision that were not characteristic of her.

"Children are vastly overrated in our society," she said at last. "More often than not they are, at best, a disappointment to those who reared and cherished them. At worst—as in your case, my dear son—they are simply no damned good. And it takes an exceptional parent to recognize and accept the fact.

"Your father, for all his judgment and knowledge of men, was not such a parent. He had hope for you right to the end. I examined his horse shortly after the funeral and found a welt on its flank. What was it, Junior? A shot from a pellet gun that caused the horse to rear and throw him?"

Mother shook her head, shaking away the past as a dog does water.

"It's too late to think about that now, but it did put me permanently on my guard. John Westmas and Dr. McWilliams kept me advised of the state of your bank balance and your sudden concern over my

health. I wasn't surprised at either.

"It was your eagerness to get me to bed with a pot of hot chocolate that let me know my time had come. The cutaway section of bridle path nearly caught me. The gun, of course, has been loaded only with blanks since the day I first guessed your intentions."

Mother seated herself carefully in Father's chair behind the big desk. Looking at her, I realized all at once what a very long time seventy and more years could be.

"John and Farley and I devised this scheme as the most humane way of dealing with you. Their testimony and that of the policemen will be enough to keep you safely cared for at least as long as I live. After that . . ."

There was a long moment of silence.

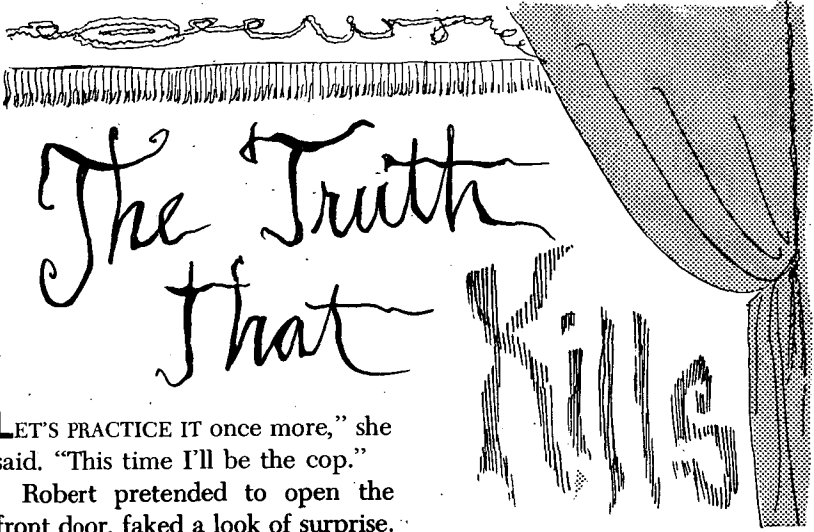
"I'm sorry to have caused you so much worry and put you to so much trouble," I said contritely. "But, Mother, there is one thing that does concern me very much."

"And what is that, my boy?"

"About my allowance while I'm away . . ."



It is that rare touch of realism that can make or break a performance.



LET'S PRACTICE IT once more," she said. "This time I'll be the cop."

Robert pretended to open the front door, faked a look of surprise. "Good morning, Officer. Come in."

Sylvia hooted. "No, *no*. You're not supposed to sound as if you're expecting him. Just innocent surprise."

He tried again. She giggled. "Darling, you're hopeless. You'd make a lousy actor. Here, I'll be you. You be the cop."

This time she pretended to answer the door, stepped back with a blank look, then whirled and smiled at her husband. "See? You don't say anything until he does. He'll ask

you if you're Robert Deraney." She turned and nodded as if to the imaginary policeman. "Yes, I'm Robert Deraney. What is it, Officer? Did I park on the wrong side again? My wife? Why do you ask? Miss Kriegher said *what*? Good night, the woman's lost her mind. Yes, of course my wife is here—and very much alive." She looked toward the stairs. "Sylvia? Someone to see you."

Then she ran up the stairs, posed at the top like Joan Fontaine in *Re-*

becca. "Good evening, Officer. You wanted to see me?"

Dropping the act, she ran down and flung herself, laughing, into Robert's arms.

"Oh, darling, I can't wait!"

"You missed your calling. What an actress."

"I only hope it doesn't rain tomorrow. I'd rather not be dragged through the mud."

"Realism, my love. That's what we're striving for."

"As long as Old Snoopy's watching."

The next morning was bright and clear. Shortly before noon they were at the back door, as charged with mischief as a pair of teenagers, nervous as actors poised in the wings; the stage in this case being a broad stretch of lawn between the patio and garage. Sylvia's car was already backed into the driveway in full view of the neighboring Cape Cod bungalow where, it was hoped, the performance's sole audience had already assumed her accustomed seat by her kitchen window, opera glasses at the ready. It was Libby Kriegher's hour for "bird watching."

by Donald Olson

Just to make sure, they'd decided to stage a curtain raiser.

Sylvia winked at Robert. "Ready, darling?"

"Go to it."

She walked swiftly toward her car.

He called after her, "Sylvia!"

Halfway across the lawn she paused.

"Sylvia! Get back here, damn you!"

"No! I'm through. I've had it. I'm leaving you, Robert. I've taken all I can."

"I'm warning you, Sylvia. Get back here before I—"

"Before you what, you beast?"

She went on from there, improvising a domestic quarrel at the top of her lungs. If Libby Kriegher weren't at her window by this time, she was either deaf or dead.

Robert gave it a few more seconds, then ran out and grabbed Sylvia's arm. She pretended to resist. A brief scuffle ensued and she appeared to give in and let herself be forced back toward the house. They yelled at each other a few more times; then, grinning at Robert, she let out a piercing scream. A moment later Libby Kriegher—assuming she was watching—might have seen Robert dragging an apparently unconscious Sylvia across the lawn; but as they were almost to the car she pretended to regain her senses,

struggled out of his arms and crawled on hands and knees back toward the house.

Robert dashed into the garage, came out with a croquet mallet, grabbed her by the hair and made as if he were striking her severely upon the head with repeated blows of the mallet. She crumpled onto the grass. He stooped over her, pretended to listen for a heartbeat, then ran to the car, pulled the keys from the ignition and opened the trunk. With a quick look around—he was sweating as if it were all real—he picked up his supposedly dead wife and proceeded to stuff her into the trunk. He flung the mallet in after her and slammed the lid shut. He wondered if Libby had already called the police.

Seconds later he was out of the drive, and with a screech of tires was shooting down Meadow Lane toward the expressway.

The childish glee with which he'd performed his part faded quickly once he was out of the neighborhood. It began to seem like what it was, a pointlessly distasteful trick. He should never have listened to Sylvia. This was all so typical of her overexcitable imagination. Instead of dealing with the problem like responsible adults, they had contrived this stupid charade.

The problem was really a minor one, scarcely worthy of such an

elaborate solution. When they'd moved to this city they had neither friends nor relatives and had in consequence gratefully welcomed the help offered by their only neighbor, Libby Kriegher, a spinster in her early forties. She looked a bit like a rabbit, having rabbit teeth and eyes that were big and very shiny, but she was the soul of goodness and a mine of information. She had them in for meals until they were settled, ran countless errands for them, and even helped Sylvia pick out furniture for the house.

When they no longer needed her, however, she was still there. Her almost constant presence became a bore and a nuisance, and her vigilance made them feel as if they were living naked in a giant fish bowl.

"Someone sick last night?" Libby would phone, before either of them was out of bed. "Saw your bathroom light on at four-fifteen."

"Was that you two lovebirds talking so loud?" she would inquire with a tactless, ingratiating leer. "Hope you kissed and made up before bedtime."

Each time Sylvia prepared a summer meal on the patio the tempting aroma would draw Libby like a magnet. "Mmmmm. Something smells mighty good, chickies. Oh, what a scrumptious-looking salad. Tell me to go away before I drool all over your hollandaise."



THE TRUTH THAT KILLS

What could they do? She'd been such a godsend in the beginning, could they tell her there wasn't enough for three, or to go drool over her own hollandaise?

They tried hints: Robert's were subtle, Sylvia's more direct; neither was effective. More than once, seeing her approach, they would lock the door and pretend not to be home; a flimsy stratagem, as she could see both their cars in the garage. After growing tired of ringing the bell she would go away sadly, humming a little tune, and when they ventured to open the door they'd be dismayed to find she'd left a really delicious-looking stew or casserole or perhaps a bunch of flowers from her garden. This would fill Robert with remorse. He would insist they invite Libby to dinner, Sylvia would refuse, and they would argue.

At last they knew something must be done. "Do you realize, darling," declared Sylvia, "that dear, sweet woman is ruining our peace of mind, and wrecking our privacy."

"But she's so good-hearted."

"That's the trouble. If she weren't, we could just tell her to flake off."

"I wonder, are we really that likable?"

"I think it's because she's that lonely."

"You know what she's done, don't you? She's adopted us."

Sylvia gave it some thought. "Suppose we make her *dislike* us."

He liked the idea. "We'll start by throwing our garbage on her lawn."

"Are you kidding? She'd pick it up, wrap it, put it into her own trash can, and thank us for thinking of her. No, it's got to be something very special. A woman like Libby is very sensitive of the impression she makes. That's why she tries too hard and turns people off. What we've got to do somehow is to make her look like an absolute fool—humiliate her—but in such a way that she brings it on herself."

Which was the germ of this repulsive idea. How could he have imagined it sounded either plausible or even decent? Libby would witness an apparent murder; she would call the police; they would arrive; Robert would act confused. Then Sylvia would make an entrance, and Libby would be left with such a mess of egg on her face she wouldn't ever dare face them again—or want to.

"And then I'll put up a fence," he'd said. "That will be that."

Now, driving down the expressway toward the side road where he could safely stop and let Sylvia out of the trunk, unseen, he wondered why he hadn't simply put up a fence in the first place. Why

had they let the relationship thicken and sicken until a crazy damn stunt like this would actually appeal to him?

Busy with these thoughts, he nearly missed the turnoff and slammed on his brakes without seeing the panel truck behind him. It struck him in the rear left fender with a terrific jolt, sending his car into the ditch.

Dazed, he lifted his head and moved his limbs. Aside from shock, he seemed unhurt. He saw the truck driver's broad face at the window and at the same instant thought of Sylvia, crouched in the trunk.

"You okay, chum?" The man was helping him out of the car.

"Yes." There was no sound from the trunk. He didn't know what to do.

"You coulda been killed, pal. Both of us."

Helplessness and anxiety made him shiver.

"You don't look so hot, buddy. You better get to a hospital, just in case."

Robert stammeringly assured him he was all right. "Is your truck damaged?"

"This crate? A Sherman tank couldn't dent it."

He was one of those placid, bovine, inoffensive giants; the hardest to get rid of. Sweat was soaking through Robert's shirt. He couldn't

keep his eyes off the trunk, yet he didn't dare go near it while the man was there. He thrust his card out, gave him his license number and insurance agent's name and managed finally to get the same information from him.

"You look kind of ropy, pal. Listen, you better sit tight and I'll go—"

"No! I mean, thanks a lot, but I don't need a doctor. I'm in sort of a hurry."

Still, the driver insisted on helping him get the car out of the ditch and only then, reluctantly, would he take his leave.

As soon as the truck disappeared, Robert swerved into the side road which wound among solemn dark pines past occasional black, rusting, oil storage tanks. Deep in the woods he backed off the road and parked behind one of the huge black cylinders. He prayed no one would drive by.

When he tried to unlock the trunk the key dropped from his shaking fingers. An oily residue from the tank oozed up around his shoes. Rusted beer cans and old bottles poked jaggedly out of the gummy soil. It was a dank, forbidding spot.

He got the key in and opened the trunk.

Her face was hidden from him, turned down, and yet he knew—from the settled unnaturalness of

her body—that she was dead. He touched her, probed for some flicker of life. He turned her head. A thread of blood ran down her chin and onto the blanket.

The urgency of grief paralyzed every other emotion. He could see neither backward nor ahead, only the icy timelessness of now. The pines, the roily sky, her body, all seemed uncannily still, frozen; only his heart kept pounding, fighting to maintain its stubborn rhythm against an overwhelming desire to die. He looked at the exhaust pipe and thought how easily it could be done. What may have stopped him was the ugliness of the place itself: the litter of cans, the oily soil, the somber pines.

He scarcely dared consider the slim possibility that Libby might not have been watching them. By now she would have called the police, told them what she'd witnessed. They would be waiting for him at home, just as they were no doubt looking for him now.

Still, there *was* that one slim chance.

Blood had dripped on the blanket but not on the trunk itself. He wrapped her in the blanket and buried her in the soft oily muck behind the tank. He tossed the mallet into the woods, then lit a cigarette, got back in the car and drove slowly home.

A wave of fatalism engulfed him as he drove; he was prepared to submit to anything, to resist nothing. If the police awaited him at the house it would all be over; it would be pointless and craven even to try to make them understand.

So artfully had he woven himself into this web of despair, it was an actual letdown when he got to the house and found it deserted. He went inside and made himself a drink. He waited. The house was funereally silent, as if only a moment earlier a horde of mourners had driven away. The oppressive silence frightened him with its atmosphere of eternal bereavement. He took the revolver from his desk and loaded it, but his emotional state was too passive and too disorganized to act on the impulse. He would do nothing, neither call the police nor contact Libby.

At seven-thirty, after sitting first with a drink, then a cigarette, then another drink, in the empurpled twilight of the empty house, he began to shiver and roused himself to light a lamp. Its red shade created a sense of mild warmth.

The doorbell rang. Robert didn't move at first, unequal to the effort required to get up and open the door. When the bell kept ringing he finally got up and went to see who it was.

There stood Libby, that same fa-

miliar, ingratiating smile on her face, a covered pot steaming in her hands. "It's my own fault if it's a flop. The recipe didn't specifically say so but I think you're supposed to use yak meat. It'll probably taste like plain old beef stew with curry powder."

Her words made no sense. Though only mildly drunk, he felt as if he were seeing and hearing her through a frosted pane of glass.



"Robert? Are you all right?"

Her naturalness sounded obscene, yet he wasn't angry with her, and he was too emotionally drained to lie to her.

"No. I'm not all right."

"You haven't eaten, have you?"

"No."

"Time you did, then. Well, may I come in?"

She was soon rattling about the kitchen, humming to herself, giving

little whoops of dismay at her own clumsiness. This homely stir and bustle dulled his anguish, but not until she called out, "Soup's on!" did he consciously wonder why she had not asked about Sylvia.

She had set one place for him and watched expectantly as he sat down. He looked up at her. "Libby—"

"Go ahead. Try it."

He took a spoonful and swallowed.

"Too much curry?"

He put the spoon down. "Libby, why are you doing this?"

"Well, someone's got to look after you."

"Sylvia's gone," he said dully.

"I know."

Their eyes met. He felt their thoughts were traveling on separate though parallel tracks.

She said, "You don't like it, do you? There is too much curry."

The absurdity of it all made him laugh. "No. It's good. It's just that I'm not hungry."

"No wonder. But you've got to eat."

Her obtuseness irritated him. He slammed down the spoon again. "Don't you understand? She's gone."

"I know that, Robert. I saw her leave." He looked at her. She ducked her head. "All right, you may as well know. I saw you take

her away in the car after the fight."

What was she up to? He looked at the stew as if it might be poisoned. "Then you saw everything."

"Everything."

He hadn't meant to explain to anyone, or even to try to, but now those spoonfuls of stew seemed to have stimulated some anti-despair mechanism.

"Libby, I know how it looked. But, honest, I didn't murder Sylvia. That fight you heard and saw, all that business with the croquet mallet, was make-believe. I didn't really hit her. It was all a charade, a crazy stunt. If you'd been there you would have heard her giggle when I put her into the trunk. But something went wrong, Libby. It was awful. I had an accident—a truck ran into me before I could stop and let her out. When I got the trunk open she was dead."

She was actually blushing with discomfort.

"Libby, I *swear* to you—"

"Please don't, Robert. We've got to decide what to do. Is Sylvia still in the car?"

"No."

"No?"

"Of course not. Do you think I'd drive around all day with her body in the car?"

"But, Robert, it was an accident. You didn't mean to kill her, did you?"

"Then you do believe me?" He could almost see a sort of radiant aura, a saintly nimbus illuminating her figure; but she was shaking her head.

"I mean, when you hit her with the mallet. Of course I don't believe you *pretended* to hit her. I saw it all, remember? You were angry and you meant to scare her, but you just got carried away and didn't realize how hard you were hitting her. But what I meant, Robert, is that maybe it could be made to look like an accident."

"No. The police are too clever. They're scientists, too, you know. They have laboratories and they'd know how long she'd been dead. Besides, it's too late. I've already buried her."

"Oh, Robert, why did you do that?"

"Because I thought there was a slim chance you might not have seen us and called the police. I certainly didn't expect you to witness a murder and *not* call the police."

Her big, shiny eyes were moist with reproach. "You really don't know me at all, do you, Robert? Why, you and Sylvia were my only friends—my whole life. You came to mean everything to me. You were always so kind and sweet. You can't imagine how I felt when I heard her screaming at you, telling you she was leaving you. Oh, Robert,

what an idiot she was. Didn't she realize how lucky she was to be loved by a man like you? You didn't mean to kill her, I know that. You just couldn't bear to have her leave you. It was so thrilling, Robert, I just sat there at the window and *shivered*. It was all so terrible and thrilling. It was like . . . Shakespeare! Like *Othello* . . . like *Romeo and Juliet*. Oh, it was marvelous!"

He was astounded. She was absolutely sincere; her eyes burned with the fire of romance. He didn't know what to think of her. It was touching and at the same time ludicrous.

"And so you didn't call the police?"

"The police! They would never have understood. I'll never tell on you, Robert. It was so tragic and so beautiful. I'll never forget it."

He felt suddenly hungry again and picked up his spoon and finished the stew.

She beamed at him. "Robert, where did you bury her?"

"Near an abandoned oil storage tank half a mile inside the old Cortwright Road."

"But what if they find her?"

"They won't."

"Even if they do, I'll say you were with me. I'll tell them I'd seen her entertaining other men. We'll think of something."

He gave her a long, affectionate

smile. "Libby, you're the most remarkable woman I've ever met."

She blushed and lowered her eyes, looking almost pretty. "Oh, Robert."

It occurred to him, not out of vanity but because he did indeed think it extraordinary she could assume such an attitude about what she had witnessed, that she might be in love with him. He felt a pang of guilt for his many sins of omission where Libby Kriegher was concerned. He knew nothing about her, nothing about her past, her experiences, her lost or still-cherished ambitions. Had she ever been in love? No, he thought not. She was too wildly romantic to get involved in a commonplace love affair. Her nature was too poetic.

"I'll just wash up these dishes," she said. "Why don't you go in the den and watch television. It'll take your mind off things."

Yes, she was still going to be a nuisance, he decided. More so than ever. At the moment, however, this was no more than a rather pleasant bother. Eventually he would sell the house and move away.

Too bad he couldn't claim Sylvia's insurance.

That he could even think such a thought appalled him. The psychology of human behavior fascinated him precisely because he had only a fuzzy knowledge of it. It was no

more to him than a constantly beguiling mystery. Which was probably a good thing, he decided, for if we ever truly understood our motives would we ever be able to live with ourselves?

This naturally led him to reflect upon the accident and the degree to which the collision with that truck had been purely accidental. Had he seen the truck behind him but not permitted his mind to register the image? Had some evil, dark, hidden design caused the accident to happen? *Had he for some as yet consciously inadmissible reason wanted Sylvia to die?* Or did he deliberately encourage these thoughts because he wanted to feel guilty and wanted to punish himself?

He sighed. The enigma was too perplexing. He lay back and shut his eyes.

He was half asleep when Libby woke him. "I thought you'd gone home," he said.

"I was just on my way when I got to thinking about the mallet."

He smiled. "What about it?"

"What did you do with it?"

"Tossed it into the woods."

"Oh, Robert, you should have buried it, or burned it. Maybe we ought to go back and get it tomorrow. Yes—it must be burned."

"Forget it, Libby. No one would connect it with Sylvia, even if it were found."

"Did you wipe off your fingerprints?"

"No. Why should I?"

"But you said yourself, Robert, they're scientists. They could find blood on it, and tissue."

He sat up and looked at her earnestly. "Libby, I want you to listen to me. It doesn't matter about the mallet. No scientist in the world would ever find Sylvia's blood or tissue on it, because there isn't any on it. That mallet never touched Sylvia's head. It appeared to, I know. It was supposed to look that way to you. That's the way we planned it."

She looked confused. "Planned it? I don't understand."

"Libby, as I said before, you're a most remarkable woman. But just in case you think you're making yourself an accessory to murder, let me relieve your mind. I was telling the truth when I said I didn't kill Sylvia. It was supposed to look that way to fool you."

She still looked bewildered. "Fool me? Robert, why should you want to fool me?"

He told her. There was no point in sparing her. If she were prepared to accept complicity in murder this would hardly even startle her. Besides, it might just put her on notice that she *had* been a nuisance and that he didn't like nuisances.

He wasn't sure how she reacted

to his confession because he didn't quite dare meet her eyes; but when he was finished she said, "You've had a very busy day, Robert. Why don't you go to bed now? I'll be back in a little while to make sure you go to sleep. Would you like some warm milk?"

"No, thanks." He looked at her. She gave him a melting smile.

When she was gone he went to sleep right there on the sofa in the den. He hadn't the energy to get undressed and go to bed.

The light woke him. He squinted and made a little grunt of protest, then he came fully awake. Libby stood a few feet away, smiling and pointing a gun at his head.

"Libby? What is it?"

"Get up, Robert. There's pen and paper on the desk there. Hurry. Go over there and sit down and write what I tell you."

"Libby, have you gone crazy?"

"Do as I say!"

He stumbled to his feet and sat down at the desk. She moved closer. "Just say that you killed your wife because she threatened to leave you. And tell where you

buried her. That's all, Robert."

"Libby, why—"

"Write!"

He did as she ordered.

"Now give it here." She read it quickly, smiled again. "Very good, Robert. I'm now going to shoot you with your own gun. The police will call it murder-suicide."

"Why, Libby? Why didn't you just call the police?"

"Because you spoiled it, Robert. I would have helped you—I would always have helped you. You shouldn't have made a fool out of me. It was all so real. When I watched you struggling with her; when I saw you run into the garage and get the mallet and kill her. Oh, Robert, it was the most exciting thing that ever happened to me. The only *real* thing." Excitement rose in a pink flush to her homely face, then faded to a bleak, dismal blankness. "And now I know it wasn't *real* at all. It was just an act. An act to make a fool out of me."

She stepped forward, raised the revolver. "Oh, Robert, why did you have to spoil it?"

She pulled the trigger.



It has been said that the fox has many tricks, and the hedgehog only one, but that is the best of all.



Let Me Count the Ways



"Sara . . . Sara?" Mr. Blug's voice cut into her reverie.

"Yes, sir?"

"I've got some letters to get off, please bring your pad into my office."

As she took his dictation efficiently, her mind wandered to Stillson, that so-and-so, who'd ruined her life.

"When you've finished those," Mr. Blug was saying, "remind me to make out a check to the insurance company for coverage on that new

SARA DIMSON had never returned to good old Galewood High for a Class Reunion weekend, and probably would have missed this one except that Selma Thalís had written her that "your ex-flame Stillson will be here, he just sent me his reservation. Come on back and 'give him hell' . . . Ha-ha."

Ha-ha, indeed! Even after twenty years the mention of his name made Sara's blood boil.

shipment of uncut diamonds we received this morning, right?"

"Yes, sir." She went out into her office and put letterhead, carbon and second sheet into her typewriter. Signed: Jason D. Blug, BLUG'S FINE JEWELRY she

by Sonora
Morrow

typed at the bottom of each letter. How many times in eighteen years had she written that? Thousands? Hundreds of thousands?

She took the letters into his office and laid them in front of him.

"Mr. Blug, I'd like to have Friday, the 17th, of next month off if it's convenient. It's the twentieth annual reunion of my high school graduating class. I've never gone back, but this time it's important."

He nodded as he read over the letters. "Of course, Sara, it'll be all right." He finished signing the letters and smiled at her. "It's always a little difficult getting along without my good right arm, but you deserve a day off. Where is it?"

"Upstate at Galewood, just four hours by train."

"Fine, fine."

She hesitated and he looked at her.

"I was just wondering . . . I mean if you say no, I'll understand, but . . ."

"What is it, my dear?"

"Well," she began, "I *really* want to make an impression, and I wondered . . . I mean if *you* think it's all right and the insurance coverage would extend and . . ." she broke off.

"What is it, Sara?"

"Could I borrow a diamond ring, a clip and some earrings to wear, please?"

Blug frowned. "Well, now, I don't know." He saw the anxiety on her face, the desperate hope, and reached over to pat her arm. "I'm sure we can work something out, Sara. Let me check the traveling-salesman clause in the insurance."

"Oh, I'd be so careful, Mr. Blug, and I'd tell everybody I got them at Blug's and maybe we might even get some business from it."

He nodded his head. "True, true. You've convinced me, if the insurance extends. Pick out what you'd like and we'll work it out."

Sara stepped off the train chic and shimmering, the old Sara of twenty years ago, not the ensuing Sara, who had left Galewood beaten and unhappy, shunning men, wearing no makeup and severe, efficient clothes. Selma met her with a hug and a kiss.

"Sara, you're just as gorgeous as I remember you. You *will* stay at our house, won't you? You were so vague about your plans."

Sara shook her head. "No, Selma, I've made a reservation at the Galewood Hotel." She smiled at her old friend. "I know what a stickler your mother is for routine, breakfast at eight, lunch and dinner on time and everyone tucked in the trundle bed by midnight. I, well, I just am something of a nonconformist and . . ."

Selma sighed. "I'm forced to agree. I know what everybody thinks, and I guess I *am* destined to be the town's spinster historian, but it's not *too* bad." She flashed a smile. "Believe it or not, I have my moments."

"I'm sure you do, dear."

"Anyway, today we visit our old teachers and their classes, and the new teachers and the students, frowzy hair, jeans, tank shirts and all. They're having a luncheon for us in the cafeteria and Mr. Raunt is still the principal. Saturday night, tomorrow, is the dance and Sunday is the picnic at Rawlins Grove." She giggled. "And wait until Stillson gets a load of *you*. Whatever *did* happen between you two? We all expected wedding bells and life ever after in Galewood."

"A difference of opinion," Sara said shortly.

Friday was a nostalgic one and

further proof that you can't go back. Sara knew all of the faces, but few of the names. It didn't matter.

In her room on the second floor of the Galewood Hotel, Sara dressed for the Saturday night dance. The ring, the clip, the earrings, thirty-eight thousand dollars wholesale, sixty thousand dollars retail, sparkled and gleamed in the dim lights of the small room. *I should have got a tiara, too*, she thought. *I feel like a princess.*

Sara had been popular in high school, but never the center of attention that she was at the dance. They could have turned off the electricity, and the room would still have had light, just from the diamonds.

"Local girl makes good," commented one jealous female classmate, dancing with her overweight spouse.

Sara was in the middle of an admiring crowd when she saw Stillson. He was still handsome, but twenty years had put lines in his face, reduced his muscular figure to a nearly underweight spare one. His brown eyes held to hers as he made his way to her.

"Will you dance with me?" he asked huskily, and she melted into his arms.

"I came to find you after . . ." he groped for words.

"The abortion?" she finished for

him. "You came to find me then?"

"It was rotten to run off and leave you like that. I was such a stupid, scared kid."

"You were nearly twenty, Stillson."

He held her closer, his mouth close to her ear. "I'd like to make it up to you, darling. Couldn't we try again? We're both older and wiser now and you've always been something special to me."

She laughed. "Yes, and now there's the pill and abortion is legal and we wouldn't have *that* trouble again, would we?"

"Sara!" His voice held shock.

Just then a vaguely familiar man cut in and danced off with Sara.

She successfully avoided Stillson until the last dance was being played. Why was it always *Good-night, Sweetheart?*

He elbowed his way through the several men who wanted her for the last dance. "Sara, you promised *me* this one," he said authoritatively.

She smiled at the others and followed him onto the dance floor.

"I *must* see you, my darling," he pleaded.

"You are seeing me, Stillson."

"Not like this," he looked around, "not with people around." He added, "People who are impressed with your diamonds."

"They do seem to be a girl's best friend, after all."

"Please, let me take you home, we *must* talk. All evening I've realized what an idiot I was ever to let you get away."

"Well," she said, "I'm staying at the Galewood Hotel and I do want to keep a good reputation. Let me leave alone and you come on about an hour from now. Come in the back door—I'll see that it's unlocked—but don't let anyone see you. I'm in 207, knock gently." She smiled at him. "I'll be listening for you."

Selma drove her to the hotel. "You killed 'em, Sara, you really did. You're still beautiful, and those *diamonds*. You going to give Stillson another chance?"

"Not in a million years," Sara said grimly. Then she turned to hug her friend. "Selma, spinsters we may be, and maybe we like it and maybe we don't, but let me guarantee you that if you save your dollars and invest them in diamonds as often as you can, you'll never be sorry." She fingered the earrings, the clip on her dress. "Diamonds can do *anything*."

The night desk clerk was a fresh-faced young man, not too long out of Galewood High himself.

"It's so great to meet an alumna as pretty as you," he stammered, "and so successful." He eyed the diamonds. "Hey, would you like to put those in the safe?"

Sara smiled at him. "No, thank you. I doubt very much there are any thieves in Galewood, and they'd have to get by a bright, alert young man like you to get to me anyway, wouldn't they?"

"Oh, yes, yes, and there's no way, ma'am, no way, believe me."

It was no problem going down the back stairs of the hotel and unlocking the rear entrance.

A gentle rap on her door came half an hour later. Sara looked both ways down the hall after letting Stillson into her room. The light was dim and no one was in sight.

He tried to embrace her and she broke away from him.

"I can't deny I still have a feeling about you," she began, "but I certainly don't intend to renew old acquaintance here and now. I've only asked you to come to tell you that, if you really care about me, you can," she smiled faintly, "pursue your courtship where I live and work."

She sat down in the room's only armchair.

"Dredging up the past can be exhausting; would you bring me that small jewelry case?" She indicated the dresser. "I'd like to put 'a girl's best friends' away for the night."

She carefully put the ring, clip and earrings into the small blue plastic case, shut the lid and handed it back to him. "Please put this into

one of the top dresser drawers."

He took the case and deposited it in one of the top drawers, then asked, "Don't you think it's kind of risky to keep those things in your room?"

"I doubt there's anything as exciting as a jewel thief in good old Galewood."

"Sara," he began, kneeling in front of her, "twenty years have gone by, I'm older and wiser. I was a fool to treat you the way I did and I'm begging you for a chance to make it up to you." He took her hand and kissed it. "Sara, my darling."

"Surely you're married."

He shook his head. "I was, briefly, ten years ago, but since the divorce I've lost track of her."

Sara stifled the impulse to ask if the poor thing had gotten pregnant for him to be so disinterested in her welfare.

"I don't know." She stood up, withdrawing her hand. "I have to think about this some more. Tomorrow at the picnic I'll give you my home address and phone number. Maybe we can work things out. I think you'd better go now."

He protested. "Couldn't we take a drive together? I know a nice quiet little bar across the river, no one we know would see us, if that's what bothers you."

"It's nearly one o'clock," she de-

murred, "and I am rather tired."

"Please, please, darling," he begged.

"Well . . . all right. Park your car two blocks over on Elm, under the trees where you won't be conspicuous. Give me half an hour or so to shower and freshen up and I'll come to you."

He smiled happily, grabbed her and kissed her.

"I'll take you down the back way and lock the door behind you," she said.

Having done so, she went back to her room and to the double windows which looked out the back of the hotel. There was a fire escape close by and a wide ledge ran around the building beneath the second floor windows. It was scuffed and weather-beaten and was wide enough for a man to walk on. She'd remembered the old hotel well. She left the window open to the June breeze and went to the dresser, opened the drawer by the sides and lifted the jewel case out with her thumbs and first fingers at the corners. Laying it on the dresser top, she carefully opened it, took out the jewels and pushed the case onto the floor under the windows. She unscrewed the top of her large cold cream jar, three-quarters filled, pushed the clip, earrings and ring down into it, and closed the jar. She was counting on the small Gale-

wood Police Department being as unsophisticated as she remembered it.

She spread the cold cream sticking to her fingers on her face, wiped it off with tissues and prepared for bed. The last thing she did before she turned out the light was to call down to the desk and ask to be awakened at seven a.m.

Half an hour later she lifted the phone receiver and tried to put-fright into her voice.

"Desk," came the clerk's voice.

"Help me, call the police," she whispered. "Someone's been in my room. I think . . . It seems as if he just went out the window."

The Galewood police were small-town, but sharp. They wrote down her frightened half-asleep impression of someone going out the window. The plastic jewel case was carefully stowed in a plastic bag to be sent to their lab. They allowed her to dress and drove her to the station to make out a full report on the jewels and their worth. They asked her who had known she had the jewels and then sent her back to the hotel in a police car and told her to relax and try to get some sleep.

At two o'clock on Sunday, all the alumni group turned up at Rawlins Grove with slightly smudgy fingers and vast hostility at having had their fingerprints taken.

"I *told* them none of you could *possibly* have taken them," Sara repeated over and over, but the picnic, fried chicken, corn on the cob, apple pies, beer and all, was ruined. Crime is interesting only when *you're* not involved.

Stillson finally cornered Sara alone under a large oak tree.

"Why did you go to bed? Weren't you planning to meet me at all? What is all this?"

She gave him a small smile. "Really, Still, I don't know what you're talking about," she said and moved away from him to stand by Selma.

At four o'clock, two stalwarts of the Galewood Police Department came to the Grove and escorted Stillson into one of the cars.

"Just routine," they said, "for questioning."

He told the truth, but Sara was backed up by Selma. ("She said she wouldn't see him again in a million years"); the desk clerk, who swore the back door was locked the whole evening and "no one could have got by me in the lobby"; and a surprise bonus of an old busybody who lived on Elm Street and spent all her days and most of her nights at her front window, noticing a strange car, fitting the description of Stillson's, parked in front of her house at one o'clock in the morning. The fingerprints on the jewel case were the

clinker, of course. Sara had denied his visit to her and it was really a beautiful frame-up.

Sara had called Mr. Blug, cried copiously over the loss, and he had reassured her that it wasn't her fault, it was fully covered by insurance, not to worry and to come back to work.

A month later she returned to Galewood for the trial, which was short, and Stillson was sentenced to one-to-five for grand theft. Since the jewels were not found, everyone suspected that Stillson, who would probably not serve more than three years, had figured \$12,666 and some cents was a pretty good tax-free yearly income with no living expenses; that he would recover the jewels and use them to good advantage when he was free—if anyone even remembered him or the diamonds after three years.

The insurance company would have investigators watching him for a time after his release, but soon even they would tire of his not producing them, and give up.

Sara settled back into her routine secretarial life and Mr. Blug had been kindness itself.

"It could have happened to anyone," he reassured her many times. "We've even been burglarized here at the store, so don't give it a thought."

Sara didn't after a while. Stillson's sentence was not as long as she would have liked, but the record of it would follow him the rest of his life. The jewels stayed in the cold cream jar. She had no plans for them, to wear or to sell. She wished she could give them back to Mr. Blug.

It was nearly Christmas when Mr. Blug called Sara into his office "for a chat."

Probably to tell me why I won't get my Christmas bonus, she thought. Business is bad and I've already cost the company thirty-eight thousand dollars. It doesn't really matter.

He saw her seated comfortably and paced the room as he talked.

"You know, Sara, anyone who works for a jewelry company is checked, at the beginning, *very* thoroughly—practically back to kindergarten days." He paused and smiled at her. "So, your leaving Galewood, the reason, and the person responsible, have been known to me since a month after you started."

Sara stared at him unbelievably.

"But," he continued, "it didn't matter, it wasn't anything criminal, and you've proved yourself a loyal, honest, efficient employee." He smiled again. "So I *know* what

you've done, and I know you're not a real thief, and you probably still have the jewels. Am I right?"

Sara began to cry. "Oh, Mr. Blug, this is *such* a relief. I've wanted to give them back to you, and I haven't known how."

He walked over to her and patted her shoulder. "Now, now," he soothed, "it's perfectly all right. In any transaction, everyone should be satisfied. You are, paying back that miserable cad; I am, being remunerated for the fantastic premiums I pay the insurance company; and now it's time for fun and profit."

She looked at him uncomprehendingly.

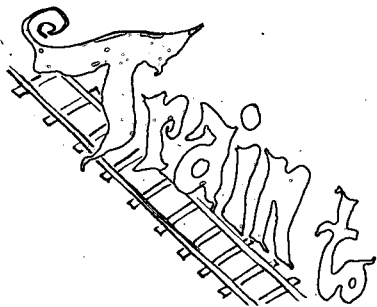
"My dear, in these days of low profit and high taxes, when two-thirds of what we earn goes for welfare, usually undeserved, and the perpetuation of nuttiness, we good people have to look after ourselves, right?"

She nodded dumbly.

"So, you give me the jewels, I'll see that they're resold profitably and legitimately, and I think we'll both make about ten thousand each. What do you say?"

Sara hesitated, but she couldn't think of a single reason to refuse. She shook Mr. Blug's hand and they smiled at each other understandingly.

Idyllic this train may sound, but there are jolting stops for its passengers.



THE GIRL in the motel bed was dead.

There was no need to check for a pulse, but I did anyway. Her flesh was cool and smooth like vinyl. I wanted to pull the sheet up to cover her, but the police don't like things rearranged before they arrive.

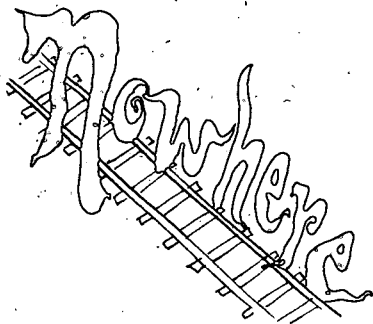
On the floor beside the bed lay a glass hypodermic needle with red calibrations on the barrel. It was empty now. On the insides of the girl's arms were the telltale patches of thickened skin running along the veins.

I dropped into a chair and tried to remember what the face had looked like six years before. It wasn't a whole lot different: the same fine cheekbones and searching

dark eyes. She was a little fuller then, maybe, and without the black smudges around the eyes—but alive; very much alive.

Six years before, I had known the face and the girl well. Then one day she wasn't around anymore. I got a funny-sad postcard from Acapulco, and that had been the end of it until about four hours ago.

I had known the voice on the phone right away—throaty and mu-



sical, but with an uneven quality that wasn't there in the old days.

"Hello, Dukane."

"Hello, Barbara."

"It's been a long time."

"Where are you?"

"I'm down the coast in Sereno Beach. The Seaview Motel. Are you

still in the detecting business?"

"Yes. Is this call professional?"

"In a way. I know this isn't fair, but I need somebody to help me, and I need him fast. Can you come?"

"Is this something the police should know about?"

"No, I can't talk to the police."

Her voice scraped on the edge of hysteria. "Please, Dukane, I need you. Will you come?"

"Sure I will." I checked my watch. Sereno Beach is just north of San Diego—a two-hour drive if there's no trouble on the freeway. "I'll be there about midnight," I said. "Anything you can tell me over the phone?"

"I don't want to. Just hurry and I'll tell you all about it when you get here." There was a little pause, and she said, "Dukane . . . do you remember how I used to get depressed sometimes and say I wanted to take a train to nowhere?"

"I remember."

"Well, I found that train. I've been riding it for six years, and now I want to get off."

"Sit tight," I said. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

by Gary
Brandner

We hung up without good-byes. I pulled on a jacket, got my car out of the carport, and headed south.

Sereno Beach is one of the towns along the old Coast Highway that suddenly lost its tourists when Interstate 5 was completed between L.A. and San Diego. This was just fine with the retired rich people who had homes there, but bad news for the small businessmen.

It was November now and the night was damp. No one walked the town's dark streets. The clack of pool balls from a beer bar could be heard a block away.

Seaview Motel sputtered and popped in blue neon before a double row of cabins. I pulled into the drive and parked beside a tired palm tree. I got out and walked across the asphalt past a mint-green sedan that ticked like a bomb as the engine metal cooled and contracted.

A light shone through a glass door labeled OFFICE. I stopped outside at the sound of angry voices. Behind the glass a tall woman with gray-streaked hair made chopping motions as she talked to a sad-faced, rumpled man. The man spread his hands and wagged his head from side to side. From years of habit I inched closer to listen.

"But I *did* try, Verna," the man was saying. "I been trying to get

you since ten o'clock. How am I supposed to know where you are if you don't tell me?"

The woman started to answer, then caught sight of me through the glass. The man followed her eyes, and their mouths snapped shut in unison. I pushed the door open and walked in.

"Sorry," the man said. "We're renovating and don't have any rooms available."

"I don't want a room," I told him. "I want to see a woman who's staying here. Her name is Barbara Lang."

"Oh, yes. Miss Lang." The man turned his back on me and shuffled through some cards. "She's in Number Two." He looked a question at the woman as I started to leave.

"Just a minute," the woman said. "Is your name Dukane?"

"That's right."

"Miss Lang asked me to give you a message. She said that you should meet her at King Neptune's. That's a bar about a mile south on the Coast Highway."

I nodded to the woman and went out to my car.

In the movies you always come upon a bartender while he's polishing glasses. In real life I have never seen it. The bartender in King Neptune's was watching *Roller Derby* on television while his three customers stared into their drinks. He

seemed happy to see me come in, and hustled a bar napkin in front of me.

"What'll it be?"

"Scotch with a water back." When he brought the drink I said, "I'm supposed to meet a woman here. Has one been in who might have been looking for somebody?"

"Not yet. I wouldn't have missed her tonight. In the middle of the week this time of year, I'm lucky to get a dozen customers all night long."

"It seems pretty slow, all right. How do you suppose the Seaview Motel up the road stays in business?"

"Eldon Minor's place? You got me. Most of the motel people closed up and moved when the freeway went through. Eldon keeps hanging in there, though. He even hired himself a manager last year."

"Is that the woman called Verna?"

"That's the one. Personally, I think Minor's got a little something going there. But why shouldn't he? He's a widower, and I hear Verna's husband is dead too. No reason why the youngsters should have all the fun, right?"

"Right," I agreed, and settled down to watch the door.

By two o'clock I was nursing my third drink, with no sign of Barbara. With the taste of trouble killing the

whisky, I threw a bill on the bar and got out of there. I wheeled back to the Seaview, bypassing the office to pull up in front of Number Two.

A cloud blanket shut out the stars. At the bay end of the motel, waves lapped at a wooden dock. Cracks of orange light showed through the venetian blinds of the room. I rapped on the door, but waited only a couple of seconds before trying the knob. The door swung open and I walked in. Somehow, I had known even before I saw her lying there.

The girl in the motel bed was dead.

I shook the memories out of my head and reached for the telephone. A harsh rattle came through the earpiece, then a click and the voice of Verna, the manager.

"Office."

"This is Dukane. You'd better get the police. Miss Lang is dead."

"Oh, no! Hold on." I heard her shouting to someone while she covered the mouthpiece. "We'll be right there," she said, and broke the connection.

In a couple of minutes Verna and Eldon Minor came pounding into the room. They stared at the dead girl as though willing her to disappear.

"Did you call the law?" I asked.

"Damn, this is going to be mighty unpleasant," Minor said.

"Death usually is."

"No, I mean this girl and our sheriff here, they were . . . well, they . . ."

"Were what?" I snapped.

"Sleeping together," Verna finished for him. "Not here, you understand. He kept her in a little house on the far end of the beach where his wife wouldn't likely run into her. How well did you know the girl?"

"Very well—a long time ago."

Verna made a sucking noise through her teeth. "I don't know what the sheriff will do when he finds her like this and you here."

"Let's call him and find out." I was losing my patience.

"I'll do it," Minor said, and shuffled out of the room.

Verna looked again at Barbara lying in the bed and the needle on the floor. "She kill herself with some kind of dope?"

"Maybe."

"I knew that woman would be trouble. If I'd been here when she came, I'd never have rented her the room. Eldon's too easy to get around."

Before I could answer that, Minor came back in and told us the sheriff was on his way. We stood around without saying much until the county car pulled up out front,

lighting the scene with flashes of red.

The sheriff's name was Jay Hacker. He was a big man with sand-colored hair and a jutting chin. Behind him came Deputy Paul Torres, a silent young man with dark, intelligent eyes.

Hacker thrust his chin in my direction. "I know the others, who are you, mister?"

I told him and showed him the photocopy of my license. I explained that I was there because Barbara had called me.

The sheriff tossed the license back to me and swore under his breath. He walked over to the bed and stood looking down at Barbara with his big hands knotted into fists. Then he reached out and touched her cheek in an oddly tender gesture. Pulling his hand back, he squatted beside the bed and poked at the hypodermic needle with a pencil.

"Overdose." He spat the word out.

"You didn't know she was an addict?" I said.

Hacker threw me a sharp look. "Sure, I knew. I mean, I knew she used to be hooked. I thought she kicked it." He stood up and walked over to stand facing me. His fingertips brushed the polished leather holster on his hip. "And just what were you doing while Barbara was

shooting herself full of junk, mister?"

"Shooting herself?" I repeated.

"Or maybe you did it for her."

I tried very hard to think of him as a man just doing his job. "I got here a little after twelve and came into the office. I was told that Barbara would meet me at King Neptune's, so I went there. When she hadn't shown up by closing time, I came back here and found her."

"He *did* go straight from here toward King Neptune's," Verna confirmed.

"And the bartender there will tell you how long I stayed. You don't have to be a doctor to tell from Barbara's body temperature that she's been dead at least an hour."

Hacker glowered at me for a moment, then turned to Minor. "Did anybody else come in after this guy left?"

"No. At least nobody drove in or I'd have seen 'em from the office."

"How about somebody in a boat?" I asked.

Minor shook his head. "That dock ain't been used in two years." The motel owner's eyes kept flicking to the body on the bed, and he was beginning to look a little green.

Verna said, "Is it okay if we go on up to the office now, Jay?"

"Go ahead." The sheriff watched the woman lead Minor out, then



looked at me. "You might as well head back to L.A., mister."

"You want me to leave? Now?"

"That's what I said. Unless you got a special reason for hanging around. I guess I can get in touch with you if I need to." Hacker's ice-blue eyes told me he wasn't kidding.

"All right, Sheriff." I started away, then turned back. "Oh, if you run across a letter for me, you can send it to my office."

"Letter?"

"Barbara said she'd written a long letter that she wanted me to have. I didn't see it in the room."

"I'll let you know if we find it. Good night, Dukane."

Deputy Torres held the door

open for me, but first I went back to the bed where Barbara lay. Without looking at the sheriff I pulled the sheet up to cover her body, and to hide the tracks on her arms; tracks for the train to nowhere. Then I went out and got in my car and drove away.

I didn't go far. As soon as the highway curved out of sight of the flickering motel sign I turned into a roadside rest area and parked behind a grove of young pine trees. I hiked back through the roadside foliage to a spot where I could watch the action at the Seaview.

In a little while an ambulance came and took Barbara's body away. The sheriff put a seal on the door and drove off with the deputy.

The lights in the office went out. After fifteen more minutes I slipped down to the motel.

I walked along behind one row of units where silent air-conditioners stuck out over the cluttered walkway. I crossed to the dock where just enough moonlight filtered through the cloud veil for me to see where I was stepping. Near the end of the dock my foot bumped against something yielding. I knelt and touched a coil of nylon line fastened to a metal cleat.

As I flexed the rope in my hands there was a bang from the shore and something buzzed over my head. I did a forward somersault into the water and submerged.

Under the dock, where I came up, there was just enough room between the water and the planks for me to stick my face out and breathe. The boards creaked above me as somebody moved cautiously out. The footsteps stopped for several minutes, and I could almost feel a pair of eyes searching the dark water. Finally the feet moved back toward shore.

The chill of the bay was in my bones by the time I felt it was safe to leave. I kicked off my shoes and swam out underwater. Some thirty yards out I surfaced and swam north until I figured I was even with the spot where I had left the car. I paddled in to the beach and

found I had overshot by about a city block.

By the time I reached the pine grove, my teeth were clattering with the cold. I got into the car, turned on the engine and the heater, and drove south. Nothing stirred at the Seaview Motel as I went by.

The eastern sky was brightening when I turned into a housing tract in the hilly part of San Diego. I pulled to the curb and dug an address book from my wallet. The pages were wet and stuck together, but I found the name of Gene Basalone. I checked the address against a San Diego map from my glove compartment and drove on to a comfortable-looking house at the end of a keyhole cul-de-sac.

Gene and I had been drinking buddies in L.A. a few years back when we were both without responsibilities and believed we would live forever. Since then Gene had gone straight—married, had a couple of kids, and became an editor on the *San Diego Union*.

I kept punching the doorbell button and hearing the chimes bong inside until Gene, unshaven in a terry-cloth robe, yanked the door open and glared out at me.

"I was in the neighborhood," I said, "and thought I'd drop in and see what you were having for

breakfast before it was all gone.”

Gene reached over to a table by the door and grabbed a pair of hornrimmed glasses. He put them on and looked me over, taking in the stocking feet and the damp clothes.

“Drunk again, eh?” he said.

“No, but I’m wet and miserable. How about inviting me in and lending me some dry clothes?”

Gene took me inside and provided tennis shoes and socks, underwear, a too-short pair of pants, and a sweat shirt. His wife, a pretty girl named Anne, came out and greeted me with the reserve which wives show around bachelor pals of their husbands. Then she went into the kitchen and made us a delicious breakfast of sausage and eggs with English muffins.

I filled Gene in on my adventures of the night. He hadn’t known Barbara, so it wasn’t a personal thing for him, but he listened with the intensity of an old crime reporter.

“Did you say the sheriff’s name is Hacker?” he said.

“Jay Hacker. I was hoping it would mean something to you.”

“It does. Hacker became quite a hero down here a couple of years ago when he was on the Border Patrol. He was in a shootout with a couple of guys trying to smuggle heroin across from Tijuana. Hacker killed both of them.”

“I remember reading something about that.”

“It was the windup of a pocket-size dope war down here. A month before the border shootout, the same two guys put the blast on Arnold Rudi, who was the local kingpin until then.”

“That one I *do* remember. They stuck a submachine gun through the window and shredded Rudi in his bed.”

“Right. His wife was standing in the doorway and saw the whole thing. She wasn’t able to give the police any help, and dropped out of sight a little while later.”

“What’s the smuggling picture now?”

“Drum tight. The Feds clamped down hard after the gunplay. A little grass may come across the border now with the kids, but no hard stuff to speak of.”

“The name Eldon Minor doesn’t mean anything? Or the Seaview Motel?”

“Nope. Dukane, if there’s a story in this, I hope you know which newspaper to call.”

I gave him a hard-eyed-reporter look. “Chief, I’ll get you a story that’ll bust this town wide open.”

“Get out of here, gumshoe,” he growled.

I polished off the breakfast, bummed a dry pack of cigarettes from Gene, and walked out to my car.

The early morning sun washed the house with golden light, making it look like an ad for suburban living. Gene's life here with his family was as remote from me as the Emerald City of Oz. I coughed around my cigarette and headed back to the highway.

The Seaview Motel with its scabby paint and cracking stucco was more a part of my world. The sheriff's car with Paul Torres in the passenger seat was parked next to the green sedan. I pulled alongside and waved to the young deputy.

"Morning," he said. "Forget something?"

"Maybe. Sheriff inside?"

"He's in Number Two, but I don't think he's going to be glad to see you."

"You're probably right." I walked on to the room where Barbara had died. From the doorway I watched Sheriff Hacker prying the baseboard loose with a long screwdriver. The bed was torn apart, the air-conditioner dismantled, and even the pipes removed from the bathroom plumbing.

"You can quit tearing the place up, Sheriff," I said.

Hacker spun around, still in a crouch, and pointed the screwdriver at me like a rapier. "What are you doing back here?"

"There isn't any letter," I said.

He stood up and scowled. "What are you talking about?"

"There isn't any letter," I repeated. "I made it up. What did you think might be in it, Sheriff? That your big gunfight at the border was a fake? Those two smugglers thought they'd bought you, didn't they? After all, you were buyable for Arnold Rudi."

Hacker let the screwdriver thump to the floor and took a step toward me.

"And you're still bought, aren't you, Sheriff?" I continued. "You're on the same payroll that you always were. Those amateurs made a mistake when they figured that by killing Rudi they'd destroy his organization. What they *did* do, by getting themselves killed by you, was to shut off the overland dope route at the border. The next easiest way to bring the stuff in is by sea. All that's needed is a boat, a place to unload, and a lawman who'll look the other way. The boat is out there somewhere, the landing place is right here, and the crooked lawman, Hacker, is you."

I expected some kind of a move, but I underestimated the sheriff's agility. He had his gun out and swinging at my head before I could react. I got my arm up in time to take some of the blow, but the revolver barrel still cracked across my cheekbone and I staggered side-

ways. As he started another swing, a figure loomed in the doorway.

"Hold it, Sheriff," Torres said.

Hacker froze and turned his head slowly to look at his deputy.

"You'd better give me the gun, Jay."

Moving with painful slowness, the sheriff handed over his revolver. You could almost see him begin to crumble like a sand sculpture drying in the sun.

The commotion brought Eldon Minor and Verna out to see what was going on. Torres held them in the doorway with his eyes.

"You'll probably want to talk to these people," I said, "about operating the Seaview Motel as a receiving point for Mexican heroin."

The deputy motioned them into the room, and Minor eyed me with a show of indignation. "What's that about heroin?"

"You told me your dock hadn't been used in two years," I said, "but there's a fresh line waiting out there to secure a boat. That's what I was checking last night when somebody took a shot at me."

"You were shot at?" Torres said.

"That's right, there's a lot at stake here. Not just the dope traffic, but the murder charge."

"What do you mean by murder?" the sheriff said.

"If you were the policeman you ought to be, you'd know Barbara

didn't give herself that OD. No junkie would carry a medical hypodermic needle like the one you found here. Just having one in your possession is a crime if you're not a doctor or a diabetic. Most addicts use a tricked-up eyedropper to dose themselves. It's effective and it's not illegal to carry around.

"Barbara was sick when she called me last night, probably into withdrawal. While she was waiting for me, somebody walked in here and offered her a fix. It wouldn't take much persuasion. It was probably uncut H, and it kept Barbara from talking, ever again."

Hacker's voice broke as he cried, "I didn't kill her."

"But it *was* your tieup with the dope traffic that Barbara wanted to tell me about. If she had known this motel was the headquarters, she would never have phoned me from here, especially since the call had to go through the office and Minor could listen in."

"You can't accuse me of murder," Minor squawked.

"Shut up," Verna cut in. "He can't prove anything."

"I'm not accusing Minor," I said. "It was you, Verna, who gave me the phony message to meet Barbara. While I waited for her at the bar, she was killed right here."

"Phony message?" Verna said.

"You told me later you weren't

here when Barbara checked in, and when I pulled up your car engine was still hot, so you couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes ahead of me. You couldn't let me get to Barbara, so when I walked in you made up the 'message' to get me out of the way."

Deputy Torres had been watching us closely. "Why would Verna kill the girl?" he said. "Even if she was a part of Minor's smuggling operation, it isn't worth killing for."

"Verna is more than just a part of it," I said. "Minor is just a hired hand like the sheriff. It makes more sense when you know Verna's last name."

The woman's hand dived under her bulky sweater and came out holding a blue-black automatic that was no woman's toy.

"Keep your hands where I can see them, Deputy," she said. "So you want my last name? All right, I'm Verna Rudi. Arnold Rudi was my husband. Dukane, it's a damn shame I missed you on the dock last night. Jay, frisk the detective here and get the guns from the deputy."

Hacker walked forward like a man in hip-deep water. He patted me down, then took the two revolvers from Torres.

Verna said, "Does it make any

difference to you boys which one dies first? No? Then I guess it's you, Dukane. I'll try to make it as painless as it was for the girl."

She swiveled the automatic toward me, but before she could pull the trigger Hacker's gun thundered and Verna staggered back with a crimson flower blooming in the middle of her chest. The sheriff shot her again on the way down, and Verna was dead when she hit the floor.

Hacker let his arm fall with the weight of the revolver. He offered no resistance when Torres took it away from him.

"Verna wouldn't believe that I really loved that girl," Hacker said in a voice drained of life. "I only gave Barbara heroin because she'd have left me if I didn't, and got it somewhere else like she did before I met her. But I would never have let anybody hurt her."

A couple of hours later, after Hacker was locked up and I'd given my statement to Torres, I drove slowly into San Diego to deliver the story I'd promised Gene Bassalone. After that I'd go and have a drink somewhere; maybe a lot of drinks—enough so I'd stop hearing the train whistle.



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It has been the experience of many that one's ineptitudes can, on occasion, be camouflaged by reflexive expediency.



HE THOUGHT he was so smart when he started working on his doctorate. I caught him, not long ago, writing "Dr. Wardlow O. Hostetter," with a lot of curlicues around the title "Dr." Frankly, I say no matter how you write it, nothing can dress up a name like Wardlow O. Hostetter, his middle name being Otis. He'd kill me if I ever told that . . .

Oh no, he wouldn't.

"You can't, can you, Wardlow Otis? You can't do anything, can you, Wardlow?"

No answer, but then, he's been

pretty sullen ever since all this stuff began, and who can blame him? He's like living in limbo. I guess that's the way it is. He won't give me the satisfaction of describing his state of mind. I *know* the state of his body.

I am married to Wardlow; Wardlow, wherever he is.

"Where are you, Wardlow?"
He's probably sitting crouched in

some corner. Well, I can't care if he doesn't choose to make his presence known.

We were married while he was working on his master's and, so help me, I thought it was for the purpose of bringing the two sexes together on a boy-girl basis. Goodness knows, it *should* have been that way, since I look like a Fellini sex fantasy and he looks like the type to dream me up. He *did* look that way, I mean. Past tense. Never underestimate a woman scorned or however that goes.

"Right, Wardlow?"

It became obvious, however, when Wardlow decreed that I should work for our bread in order to give him time to stuff the knowledge in, and type every word of his thesis in order to let the knowledge out, that this was not going to be a Me, Sweetheart-Him, Lover relationship; but rather Me, Serf-Him, Master.

I did not lose hope. Instead, I kept my false eyelashes fluttering and my sexy body curved on that typewriter chair, thinking that once he got his master's, he'd rush right out and get himself a job teaching the classics and I could relax into my woman's role of simply being desirable; but higher education got into his bloodstream, and/or he realized he had a good thing going.

So the next thing I knew I was

still typing insurance forms by day and a doctoral dissertation by night, entitled: *NECROMANCY, GOETY AND THAUMATURGY. A Significant Phenomenon of Classical Culture.*

"What, out of the world, does that mean?" I cried, and got my first put-down.

"Don't worry about it, Elizabeth," Wardlow said dogmatically, "just type it," as if I had only enough I.Q. to tap my fingers on a typewriter keyboard and should leave the brain-drive to him.

I got out his Funk & Wagnall's and ran my finger down the N's . . . "NECROMANCY: the art of revealing the future by means of alleged communication with the dead," read the definition.

I shuddered.

Then I ran my finger down the G's, and found "GOETY" defined as "witchcraft," and narrowed my eyes.

Next the T's. "THAUMATURGY: the working of miracles."

I sat there dazed, staring at the word meanings, feeling a strange sense of homecoming. You know how it is? You walk into an unfamiliar room and you think, *I feel as if I have been here before.*

"That is the way it was, Wardlow."

No answer. He is deep in his

sulks again, running true to form.

"I warned you, Wardlow. Remember? I said, 'Don't do your dissertation on this subject, Wardlow. It is dangerous.'"

"But you laughed. You replied, 'How could it be dangerous?'"

"I said, 'The dissertation is filled with peril.' You should not have laughed, Wardlow. For your sake, you should not have laughed at my terror.

"Still, Wardlow, even with your laughter creeping along my flesh, I offered you another chance. 'All right, Wardlow,' I said, smoothing down my flesh, 'if you insist upon writing a dissertation on Necromancy, Goety and Thaumaturgy . . .' trembling, I might add, with each phonetic intonation, 'then I must ask that you get someone else to do your typing.'"

"Just type it and shut up,' you said with great weariness, and turned from me.

"Wardlow, laughter was enough, but to turn wearily from me was too much."

In anger then, but still in innocence, I began the task of typing the dissertation; fearful, not knowing what I feared, knowing only that I was entering this strange, yet familiar, room filled with an awful knowledge I was afraid to learn and shrank from learning again.

"You did not understand, Ward-

low. You would not listen. Wardlow, I warned you . . ."

Unfortunately, he thought of the dissertation as the compounding of classical knowledge only, and not as a combination of literature and religion with alchemy and wizardry. Even though he made the statement, right there in the dissertation, and I quote: "Witchcraft has been a significant phenomenon of all cultures, coloring and molding religious and social attitudes . . ." they were words only to him, his literal mind never seeking to find the deeper meaning of thaumaturgic arcana.

"But *I* knew, O Wardlow! As hags bestride cats who come to the Sabbat for sharing diabolical sacraments, *I* knew!"

I knew and watched and read and typed and waited. My blood ran cold with what I was to learn.

"Wardlow!" I cry; "I wanted only to be a Fellini fantasy and not what I had to become with the words you made me write to make me understand."

Oh, well, Wardlow is not listening. He never listens except to the click of his own fundamentalist brain. So meekly, then, I continued my servitude.

"Hear that, Wardlow? My meek servitude!" . . . Not happily nor with contentment, but efficiently typing the words of the dissertation

from those miserable hen-tracks that were his research notes—until I arrived at the description of the Hierarchy of the Infernal Regions from the Key of Solomon, and realized I had reached the total familiarity of this strange familiar room and knew what I must do as I tapped out the words in anguish.

Plunk-plunk. The black and terrible message spelled itself out on the paper, naming the names of the infernal spirits—Lucifer, Beelzebub and Astorath; naming the names of their subjects—Lucifuge, Satanachia, Agaliarept, Fleuretty and Sargatanas; naming too, all of the eighteen subordinates.

I remembered! I knew of these demons, their spirits and subjects.

Tears rolled down my cheeks to salt my lips and tongue. I sprang to my feet and walked the floor, no longer swinging my hips Fellini-wise, but crouched in weeping witchy concentration.

Wardlow heeded me not as he bent over his piles of textbooks, filling his brain with the wisdom of sorcerers and friars, of alchemists and mystics, reasoning in error that this knowledge was but a perverted pattern in classical culture . . .

Stupid!

“Wardlow, you should have paid attention. You could have stopped me and I might have remained human. But you paid no attention,

Wardlow, so then I had to do what I did . . .

“Well, Wardlow, that is the way it was.”

I dried my tears and crept back to the typewriter, a lost cry rising to my throat as I tapped out the instructional heading: *How to Make a Demoniac Pact*, from Wardlow’s hen-track notes.

My eyes needed barely to glance at the notes, for they were a reminder only. I already knew how to make the pact!

“You didn’t even awaken when I crept out that night during the witching hour, Wardlow. You only sighed and turned as if your sleeping mind were still steeped in old and dusty volumes of knowledge that you thought of as legendary.

“It was in the deep, still dark before dawn that I drove away in the VW you thought I was too dumb to drive, with the knife you had just bought, the brand-new knife to sharpen pencils . . . Oh, yes, it had to be a new knife. I had it on the seat beside me as I searched through the dark for a nut tree. I found it by the side of the road, a volunteer, a wild thing, twisted and dwarfed. I stood beside it and the moment the morning sun made a ribbon of light along the horizon, I slashed a twig from the tree that had never borne fruit.

“Nor did you hear me when I re-

turned, Wardlow. I put the now-used knife back on your desk and hid the twig that was now my thundering rod.

"You did not awaken until the water was hot for the instant coffee and I had your Wheaties in the bowl. You left after feeding, to feed yourself more units of knowledge, not knowing that I would not go to work that day to type the deadly-dull insurance forms, but that I would stay home and make my Demon Pact."

I trembled as I pulled the blinds against the sun and pushed back the table and rolled up the rug. Then I fortified my memory by rereading the typed words of the night before.

A bloodstone! I wrung my hands, having no bloodstone.

I remembered, then, the red bottle that was almost empty of wine. I broke it against the edge of the sink and selected the sliver that shone with a drop of my blood. I rummaged frantically through the cluttered kitchen drawers for two half-burnt candles.

I intoned the words from the hen-track notes and the carefully typed page: "Great invocation of the Spirits, I wish to make a pact . . ."

I became engrossed and enthralled as I traced a triangle with the bloodstone upon the bare floor.

I set the two candles at the side. I stood in the center of the triangle with the mystic wand in my hand.

Bowing my head, I chanted: "Emperor Lucifer, Master of all the rebellious spirits, I beg you to be favorable in the invocation that I make. I beg you also, Prince Beelzebub, to protect me in my enterprise. Oh, Great Lucifuge! Leave your abode in whatever region of the earth it may be. Come and speak to me . . ."

Thunder roared and lightning crashed on this day of sunshine. I shrank and trembled and was afraid.

Then I firmed my limp legs and planted my feet more solidly on the floor. I cleared my throat of terror and cried out, "Obey promptly or you will be tortured eternally by the force of the words of the Key of Solomon . . ."

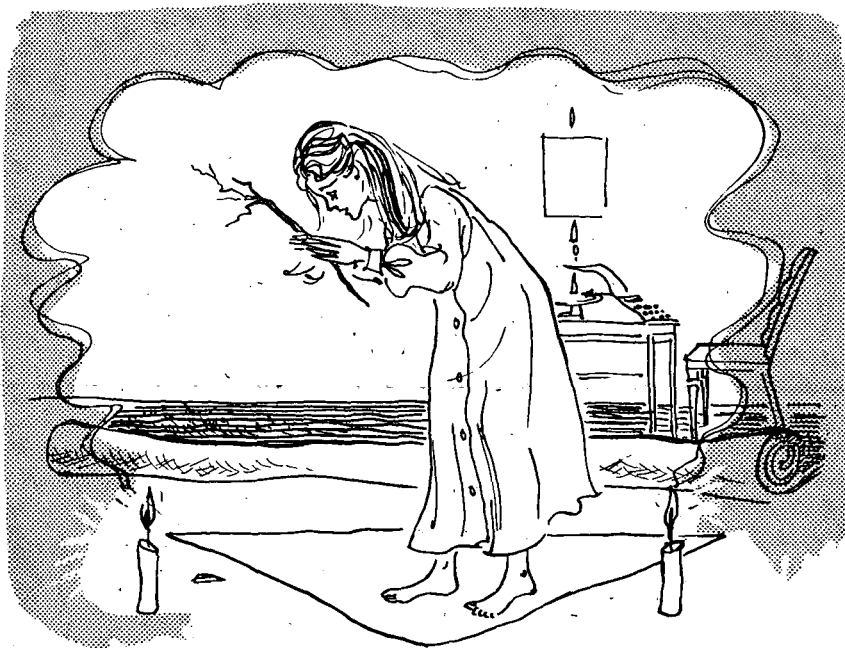
The thunder and lightning ceased. I felt great strength.

I finished the invocation in a whisper, "Agion, Telagram, vay-cheon stimulaton y ezipares re-tragrammaton oryoram irion esy-tion existion eryona onera brasim moym mesias soter Emanuel Saboot Adonai, te adoro et invoco."

IT WAS DONE!

"It is done, Wardlow. Do I hear a sound?"

No. Well, Wardlow is greatly distressed.



"Wardlow, you didn't even know that evening, when you arrived from the Halls of Learning where you learn only words and not the meaning, you did not know that I was no longer your Fellini fantasy whom you ignored, but had become a witch which was my right by heritage. You didn't know. You did not know, Wardlow.

"Instead, you ate your TV dinner with your nose buried in your notes and the used-once-only knife by your side so that you could sharpen pencils.

"The rug was back on the floor by then and the candles put away. The twig had been hidden and the

bloodstone was in the pocket of my robe."

I typed part of the new notes that evening, the very part I needed that described the magic spell Simaetha used to win back her Delphis' love.

The next day, I phoned the insurance company and in my weakest Fellini-fantasy voice, I told them I had a touch of botulism, so that I had the day in which to gather my love charms for winning back my Wardlow's love.

I found the laurel leaves down the street and plucked them with nonchalance as I walked along the hedge. I plucked them from the be-

ginning of the hedge to the end of it, stuffing the leaves into the pocket of my coat.

Then, at the supermarket, I bought two ears of corn covered by fine, thick husks, the last of the crop; I sent down thanksgiving to Lucifer. I could find no fresh herbs and hoped the dried kind in jars would suffice, buying mint, thyme, basil, sage and rosemary.

At the yarn shop, I bought bright-red wool.

I was ready and quaked with foreboding that my witchcraft would not be great enough to bring back to me my Wardlow, whose strength had gone to his brain.

I put the husks of the corn in a safe place, and boiled the corn, giving it to Wardlow along with his TV dinner.

He ate with his nose in his notes, not even knowing what it was he ate, and I shrugged and busied myself at typing the rest of *Love Knots* and started the *Invisibility Incantation*, and Wardlow went to bed.

Before I had finished, he was asleep. Wardlow falls into bed like a lead weight and immediately conks off like a log. I mean, that's the way it once was. I don't know how it is now.

"How is it now, Wardlow?"

My voice, when I speak to him, is filled with petulance, but this situ-

ation is his fault too, you know. Well, maybe more mine than his, but it was his first, and mine in the middle, and then his last.

I thought the conjuration would go off perfectly the night I used Simaetha's spell. I thought Wardlow would surely be mine so that I could then call out the Spell for Banishing a Demon and become, once more, the Fellini-fantasy sex symbol and we would live happily forever after . . .

That's what I thought.

I tiptoed into the kitchen and dragged the laurel leaves from the drawer where I had them concealed. I found a tray and placed Wardlow's Wheaties bowl upon it. I crushed the laurel leaves in the bowl and, over them, I shook the dried mint, thyme, basil, sage and rosemary, whispering as I did so, "I will bewitch him with enchantment . . . bewitch . . . bewitch."

I braided and knotted the yarn, wreathing the bowl with bright-red wool, chanting all the while, "My magic wheel, draw home to me the man I love!"

Creeping softly to the bedroom, I looked into the dark where Wardlow peacefully slept. I crept back and crouched over the tray, calling softly, "Hail, awful Hecate! Make this medicine of mine strong. Magic wheel, draw home to me the man I love!"

With the tray prepared, the kitchen light off and a candle flickering its glow, I dropped the corn husks into the sink and touched the candle flame to them . . . "Now will I burn the husks, and thou, O Artemis, hast power to move hell's adamantine gates. My magic wheel, draw home to me the man I love!"

The husks flamed and smoke curled into the shadows.

"Lo, silent is the deep and silent the winds, but never silent the torment in my breast. Nay, I am all on fire for him that made me miserable."

I wept a moment and then held my breath in anticipation.

Moving softly to the bedroom, I looked upon the sleeping Wardlow, a scholarly frown upon his face, and turned in fury, back to the kitchen, back to the candle, back to my love charms and wreath.

"My magic wheel," I chanted through my teeth, "draw home to me the man I love!"

Once again I studied the hen-track notes and the orderly typing. I muttered the incantation, "I take these magic herbs and secretly smear the juice on the jambs of his gate whereat, even now, my heart is captive . . ."

But the herbs were too dry, so I took my bloodstone and pierced my finger to mix my blood with the mint, the thyme, the basil, sage and

rosemary. With this bloody pulp, I smeared the sides of the bedroom door and fell, exhausted, into bed beside my sleeping scholar.

In the morning, he ate his Wheaties from the bowl that had held the love charms and never once noticed that I sat across from him, topless.

I had failed! And so I panicked.

The next night, I tried again.

"Wardlow, I thought it was Fleuretty I had at my command, with Bathim, Pursan and Abigar, all of whom had the power to perform the love task that I asked. I desired only that you forget your cultural classics, Wardlow, and be with me in the night. But I am young at this, or I have forgotten and so, instead, it was Sargatanas, with Loray, Valefar and Foraü I had in command, those who have a power of another kind.

"All might have been well, in spite of my ineptitude, had it not been for your mistake, O scholar-in-error. For you had mistakenly headed the incantations, titling *Love Knots* for *Invisibility*; and *Invisibility* for *Love Knots*.

"The spell I had planned to weave, which was *Love Knots*, should have been the taking of a band of linen of sixteen threads, four of white, four of green, four of blue and four of red, to make of them one band and stain it with the

blood of a hoopoe . . . and I could have found a hoopoe some way, Wardlow, and that should have been bound with a scarab and wrapped in byssus . . . I could have found some byssus, too, Wardlow.

"That was the spell I should have incanted. But, unfortunately, Wardlow, you had called that the *Invisible Spell*, so you by your mistake and I in my ineptitude, summoned three sister fairies, Milia, Sibylia and Achilia, and I had them come and lie in your bed and bind a silken handkerchief around your head. And one of them put a ring on your finger, and I heard her say, Wardlow, 'When thou hast this ring on thy finger, look in a glass and thou shalt not see thyself.'

"I screamed then, Wardlow, for I couldn't see you either, and knew, immediately, that I had spelled you with invisibility instead of with love!

"Oh, Wardlow, even you pulled your head out of your books the next morning, for you were not there.

"I *might* be able to change things, Wardlow. If I can conjure

Sargatanas to depart, along with Loray, Valefar and Forai, and charm Agaliarept, who can unveil all mystery and give you a body again.

"I *might*, Wardlow. I might, except that you have told me I am not very smart, only smart enough to work for our bread and type dissertations, so how can I be smart enough to exorcise one devil to create another, and thus recreate you without accident? How, Wardlow?

"Oh, you speak! You speak at last! I *knew* you were there. But you speak too hurriedly, Wardlow. You speak in frustration, and you are not making words.

"Well, never mind, Wardlow. I can always enter the Halls of Learning myself and continue the research where you left off and, perhaps, find an incantation, someday, that will return you to visibility. On the other hand, all that education might put all my Fellinifantasy strength into my brain, where it would prefer that you remain wherever and however you are."



*Certainly something should be done about the rising crime rate—
but where to begin?*



THE GREAT white cruise ship, berthed at the long pier, was dazzling in a glare of early spring sunshine, with pennants and flags whipping in a breeze from the ocean and sea gulls floating effortlessly against the clear blue sky.

"California, Here I Come," played by a brass band, flowed from hidden speakers on all the decks. The recording would continue over

and over until the last passenger went ashore.

Louis Bonnard leaned against the ship's rail with several fellow stewards, waiting to see his charges go down the long gangplank; the people whose cabins he was assigned to serve on this world cruise.

Bonnard watched Mrs. Raleigh teetering down to the pier on her high heels and wondered what she

would do in Los Angeles. A rich dame like that had friends in every port. Mrs. Raleigh had told him, first day aboard, that she was a widow. Her husband had been president of some big corporation in New York; dead only a year. Lots of rich widows took these cruises hoping to find another husband. He saw Mrs. Raleigh approach one of the waiting limousines. The uniformed chauffeur removed his cap and opened the car door for her. Mrs. Raleigh and the other rich ones wouldn't ride in those chartered buses lined up near the entrance to the pier.

The other stewards, mostly Italian and French, made rude remarks and laughed at some of the people whose cabins they served. They called them pigs and complained about their tips.

by Vincent
McConnor

Louis Bonnard never joined in that kind of talk. He was good at his job, proud of the way he catered to the needs of his charges, with no complaints about the tips they gave him. This was the fifth cruise he had worked on this liner, and his passengers had already given him more tips than usual.

He watched Mr. Garrison and his pretty secretary going down the gangplank. Miss Wilmer was helping the old man, holding his arm. They occupied the most expensive cabins on the ship—the millionaire's suite—and he had guessed, when he served their first bottle of champagne before they sailed from New York, that blonde Miss Wilmer was much more than a secretary. Garrison was sure to know important people in the cinema colony. He watched the smiling chauffeur salute and help them into a sleek black limousine.

Later in the day, when his work was finished, he would go ashore; but he wouldn't bother with Los Angeles this trip. There was some shopping he needed to do, and maybe see a movie and have dinner. He mustn't spend too much because he had to save every centime for that bar he would own one day on the Riviera. Another four or five years . . .

Mr. and Mrs. Benson were going down the gangplank. Nice couple. Always laughing and pleasant. No matter where you saw them—any port in the world—you would know they were American tourists. Not rich but, from the size of their tips, comfortably fixed. Mr. Benson had told him that he was retired, but he never mentioned what sort of business he had been in. He watched

the Bensons walking along the pier toward the chartered buses. They wouldn't waste money on a limousine.

Louis had been worried about the Bensons when they went ashore at Panama. So many characters, criminal types, waited in every port to rob tourists. The Bensons were innocents. They would be smiling and friendly with anybody who approached them. Nothing had happened in Panama or Acapulco, but he would start to worry again when the cruise reached the Orient. Some of those ports were really dangerous. There had been incidents on all of his previous cruises, but there had never been any publicity. Each robbery and mugging was hushed up, the people involved warned not to discuss what had happened with any of their fellow passengers—except they always told their steward.

Mr. Benson was helping his wife up the steps into one of the big buses.

Louis wondered what they would do in Los Angeles . . .

Mrs. Benson was wearing a flowered scarf over her head, tied beneath her chin, gray hair fluffed out around her plump cheeks. She was dressed in green slacks and a blouse patterned with bright tropical birds. White sandals on her bare feet revealed scarlet-painted toe-

nails, and she was clutching a large white handbag.

Her husband was wearing a yellow cloth cap with a white plastic visor, and an expensive camera hung from his shoulder on a leather strap. He, too, was wearing sandals, plain leather, which he had bought in Acapulco. Both Bensons had sunglasses over their eyes which made them appear even more like tourists.

When they left the bus, like good tourists they hesitated on the corner to get their bearings.

"Oooh!" Millie Benson squealed. "Isn't that the Chinese Theater over there?"

They crossed the boulevard when the traffic light turned green, and joined the other tourists milling about in the forecourt of the movie palace.

Harry photographed Millie trying to fit her sandal into some of the stars' footprints preserved in cement, but all the women's feet proved to be smaller than hers.

The Bensons avoided a man who was offering maps of movie stars' homes, and continued on down Hollywood Boulevard.

They read the names of film stars embedded in the sidewalks, and were pleased when they discovered one of their favorites.

When they reached the corner of Hollywood and Vine, there was

nothing to see but a department store, drugstore and restaurant; nothing to show that this was the heart of Hollywood.

"Well! I certainly never thought it would be like this," Millie complained, disappointed. "Did you, Harry?"

Benson only grunted as they turned to look back, down the length of the boulevard.

"Only nice thing is those little trees they've planted along the curb," Millie observed.

Harry squinted at them. "They look kinda poorly. Need water." He noticed a dark youth standing near the window of a haberdashery, watching them. He was wearing a loud sport shirt and red slacks. Benson turned back to his wife. "Where do we go now, honey?"

"Let's take one of those studio tours. Then I want to see Olvera Street and Malibu . . ."

"You folks strangers in town?"

They turned to face the dark young man in red slacks who had crossed the sidewalk toward them.

"Yeah," Harry answered. "We're strangers, all right."

"Could I help you, maybe? Show you the city?"

"That's real kind." Millie glanced at her husband. "But I think we can manage."

"Thanks, young man," Harry answered. "We're doin' okay."

Harry signaled a taxi and told the driver they wanted to go to a movie studio where they had tours.

The tour was fascinating. Harry enjoyed watching the stunt men while Millie exclaimed at the fancy dressing rooms which their guide said had been occupied by famous female stars. Both were startled by the towering Frankenstein monster that came lurching out of the shadows. It was only an actor in a rubber mask and platform shoes, but all the women on the tour squealed with fright as their husbands laughed.

The Bensons took a bus to Hollywood and a taxi to Olvera Street where, after inspecting the shops, they ate lunch on the terrace of a restaurant. The Mexican food was strange, but it was pleasant to sit in the bright sunlight, watching other tourists wander past.

They caught a bus back to Hollywood where they found a taxi and asked the driver if he could drive them to Malibu.

"Sure can, folks! Sunset Boulevard all the way . . ."

The expensive-looking homes along the edge of the ocean, from white Colonial to exotic Japanese, more than lived up to their advance expectations. The driver told them which stars lived in each mansion, but Millie suspected that he had no idea who lived in any of them.

They drove back to Beverly Hills, this time on Wilshire Boulevard, and spent the next hour on foot, staring into the elegant shop windows.

Harry, as they walked, became aware of a man watching them. He leaned close to Millie. "I think we're bein' followed, honey. Man in fancy pants. Right behind us."

"I know. Saw him earlier."

As they paused at the next shop window, Millie watched the man pass behind them. He was a good-looking young fellow who could be an actor. He wore an olive-colored tropical jacket and slacks made from some kind of madras material. She watched him cross the next corner without looking back.

"What do we do next?" Harry asked.

"I want to see where the stars live here in Beverly Hills. Only I'm gettin' hungry again. All this walking, I guess."

"Maybe we could have an early dinner. Go to a movie before we take the bus back to the ship."

"Look there!" Millie pointed across the boulevard. "The Brown Derby! Where the movie people eat. I've read about it in the fan magazines." Glancing at the jeweled watch on her plump, suntanned wrist, she said, "Guess it's a little early for dinner."

"They're open! Couple of people

just coming out," he told her.

"Let's try it, Harry! Have a nice dinner."

"Okay, honey. I could use a drink."

"So could I."

They crossed the boulevard and entered the restaurant.

The spacious room was dim and cool, after the heat of the afternoon. Only half a dozen tables were occupied. An attractive girl escorted them to a table near one of the curtained windows, and a waiter brought menus.

Harry ordered dry martinis and they settled down to consider what they should eat. As usual, in a new city, they looked for something they had never had before, and decided on abalone. When the waiter brought their martinis and took the order, he suggested that they start with a salad that was a specialty of the house.

The martinis were excellent, cold and dry. As they sipped, they noticed a man come in from the street and, after a quick look around, approach their table. They looked away as he came close, aware that he was heading for the table directly across from them.

It was the young man, handsome as an actor, they had noticed on the street.

Harry asked the waiter for another order of martinis. While they

waited, the Bensons made small talk about what they had seen—Hollywood, Olvera Street and Malibu—aware that the young man was eavesdropping.

As she tasted her second martini, Millie realized that he was trying to catch her eye. He smiled whenever she looked anywhere near him. She had listened as he ordered a Monte Cristo sandwich, whatever that might be, and a bottle of imported beer.

The Bensons enjoyed their salad, which the waiter served with elaborate ceremony, as the young man ate his sandwich.

Millie saw that his clothes looked expensive.

Harry noticed that he wore an elaborate wristwatch and a large diamond ring. He was careful, as he ate, not to catch the fellow's eye.

They continued to make small talk, aware of the stranger watching and listening, discussing their food. The abalone was kind of sweet, not like anything they had ever eaten. Sort of a nutty taste, although that could be from the slivers of almonds that had been cooked with it. Both Millie and Harry ate with appetite.

The young man had finished his sandwich and was pouring a second glass of beer. He was, quite obviously, trying to prolong his observation of the Bensons.

Millie seldom ate dessert, but Harry selected a strawberry tart from the chromium cart the waiter wheeled up for their inspection. Harry demolished the tart as Millie sipped coffee.

That was when the young man spoke. "Excuse me, sir . . ."

Both the Bensons turned to face him.

"Yes, young man?" Harry was smiling, enjoying the strawberries in their rich custard filling.

"You folks are strangers in town, aren't you?"

"That's right," Millie answered. "Arrived last weekend."

Harry nodded. "Out here on vacation. Looking around in case we decide to move out to stay. I'm retired and the wife an' I are gettin' a mite old for Chicago winters."

"Don't blame you." The young man smiled at Millie. "Did you drive all the way from Chicago?"

"Oh, no!" Millie answered. "We've got a new Cadillac, but we never take it on long trips. We flew out. From here we're goin' down to Mexico for a week. Suppose you've been there?"

"Many times!"

Millie saw that he had good, white teeth, a nice smile.

"Would you folks mind if I join you?"

"Please!" Harry moved over so that he could sit with them.

The young man rose, picking up his unfinished glass of beer, and brought it to their table. He sat at the end of the circular leather seat, next to Harry, facing Millie. "Maybe I could drive you folks somewhere. My car's in that parking lot across the street. You can't see anything without a car."

"We've sure found that out!" Harry agreed. "Been riding all day

in taxis. Getting tired of them."

"Where'd you plan to go next?"

"Well . . ." Millie hesitated.

"Thought we'd see some of these homes I've read about—in Beverly Hills, where the movie stars live."

"I've nothing to do for the next hour. Why don't you let me show you around?"

"Couldn't impose on you, young man!" Harry exclaimed, although



from his tone of voice you could tell that he might be persuaded. "We'll find another taxi."

"Nonsense! I insist."

"Must say that's real kind." Millie smiled, obviously eager to accept the stranger's offer.

"My name's Kingsley. Dave Kingsley."

"And I . . ." Millie glanced at Harry as she talked. "I'm Mrs. Harris and this is Mr. Harris."

"Glad to know you. Let me pay my check and then I'll pick up the car."

"Let me pay that." Harry snatched the slip of paper from the table. "Not a word! I insist. It's nothing."

"In that case, I'll get the car."

"We'll be right out. Soon as I find our waitress."

Kingsley got to his feet, still smiling. "I'll wait outside." He headed for the entrance.

"See where he goes," Harry whispered.

Millie turned and watched Kingsley cross the street toward the parking lot.

The waitress appeared and gave Harry their check. He left a tip as he got to his feet.

Millie rose, her eyes on the parking lot, and followed her husband to the cashier's desk. As Harry paid the bill she saw a convertible leave the parking lot and swing around to

park in front of the restaurant. "He's driving a green convertible," she whispered as they went toward the door. "Looks new."

Outside, Kingsley was standing beside his car parked at the curb, smiling and holding the door open.

"Think we can all sit in front. Lots of room."

"What a lovely car!" Millie slid in first, followed by Harry.

Kingsley closed the door and circled the car to sit at the wheel.

"Where exactly are we?" Millie asked. "I'm completely lost."

"This is the heart of Beverly Hills, you might say. All the best shops."

The car crept through heavy traffic but, after a few blocks, turned into a side street and, before long, was rolling through broad residential streets lined with trees where handsome mansions stood in elaborately landscaped gardens.

"This used to be Jack Benny's home," Kingsley motioned toward an attractive house. "And this next one is where Lucille Ball lives . . ."

The Bensons peered from side to side as each famous star's residence was pointed out.

"Mighty good of you, young man," Harry said. "Taking the time to show us around. I'm sure you must have other things to do."

"Yes!" Millie agreed. "We shouldn't keep you."

"Not at all. I want to drive you up one of our canyons. Show you the view from the top of the hills."

"That sounds marvelous!"

"Only I'll have to make a phone call, tell my office I won't be in until later. I can phone from that drugstore. Won't take a minute." He eased the convertible into a parking lot behind a row of shops and went into the corner drugstore.

The Bensons sat without talking; alert and expectant.

Kingsley returned quickly and took his place at the wheel again. "That's done! Now there's no need for me to get back to the office. Good to take an afternoon off. Thought we'd drive through Bel Air before we go up into the hills. . . ."

"You're very kind, Mr. Kingsley." Millie clutched her bag, peering from side to side, as they drove through another residential section with tall palm trees. Their guide once again pointed out which mansions belonged to stars.

After half an hour of this they came to another business area. Kingsley swerved his convertible into a filling station. "Better get some gas before we head into the hills."

"Let me pay for this." Harry reached into his pocket.

"Wouldn't think of it!" Kingsley turned toward the approaching attendant.

As Kingsley gave his order to the man, the Bensons looked around the gas station. Two other cars were at the pumps. Several uniformed attendants were busy. They both noticed a young man in a black leather outfit, off to one side, hunched on a motorcycle. Couldn't see his face because he had goggles over his eyes, and a leather hood covered his hair, ears and chin. Only the tip of his nose and his mouth were visible. He seemed to be watching the convertible but, realizing that they had seen him, he looked away. He jammed his boot down on the starter and roared around the edge of the gas station, skirting the sidewalk, shot out into the street and sped away.

Kingsley paid for the gas and headed his convertible out onto the street, turning off Sunset into a rural-looking road that curved between heavily wooded hills. "This is one of our famous canyons," he explained. "Big estates here. Texas millionaires and movie producers. I'll take you up to the top and show you the view. Can see the whole city—downtown to City Hall and, in the other direction, out to Catalina. That's if it's clear, not too much smog."

They were aware, as he talked, that the road was taking them higher and higher; through some areas that were in deep shadow, al-

most like twilight, then out again, higher up, into golden sunlight.

Millie glanced at her wristwatch. "My! It's almost six-thirty. We shouldn't have kept you this late, Mr. Kingsley."

"Nonsense! I don't have to be home until after seven."

As they approached the top of the canyon, the Bensons heard the sound of a motorcycle behind them.

Millie nudged Harry.

The motorcycle didn't come into view, but the sound was there, following them.

Kingsley gave no indication that he had noticed.

The Bensons remained silent as the convertible turned out of the canyon, at the top, onto a road that followed the curving crests of the hills. Private estates with elaborate gardens were on one side, a view of the distant city on the other, glimpsed through a heavy yellow haze. They noticed several new developments on lower levels, where the earth had been stripped bare. The workmen had departed for the day, leaving their bulldozers and tractors behind.

"That's the San Fernando Valley," Kingsley explained. "Afraid you're not going to see much through this smog." He eased the convertible down a sloping lane that led to a rustic house, low and rambling, in an overgrown garden,

on a narrow promontory of land.

"Isn't this a private road?" Harry asked.

"Don't worry. House is for sale. Been vacant for months. I'll park here and you folks can see what there is of the view." He stopped the convertible at the end of the lane, near the rim of a canyon. "We can get out and walk to the edge."

Harry opened the door and eased himself from the car, turning to help Millie. As he did so he observed that Kingsley had left his key in the ignition.

Kingsley led them close to the canyon's rim. The Bensons saw that there was a drop of at least thirty feet into a wild area of jagged rocks and gnarled underbrush.

The sound of the motorcycle was much closer.

They realized that there was no other house in sight. Nobody could see them here. The Bensons looked around as the roar of the motorcycle came hurtling toward them.

The black-leather figure, crouched low on his machine, sped down the lane and came to a screeching halt behind Kingsley's convertible.

"What is this?" Harry asked.

"Now, folks! Don't get excited." Kingsley smiled as he faced them. "We aren't going to hurt you unless you force us."

The ominous leather figure lifted

his motorcycle onto its rest and swaggered arrogantly toward them.

"Just hand over your wallet, Mr. Harris," Kingsley ordered. "And that camera."

"You mean this is a stickup?" Harry's voice quavered, his eyes held by the menacing figure of the cyclist.

"That's right!" Kingsley turned to Millie. "Your jewelry, Mrs. Harris. All your rings. I like diamonds myself, so I noticed yours are real. And that fancy watch you're wearing. Everything you've got in your bag. Won't do you any good to yell. Nobody around to hear you. Nearest house is in that next canyon."

Harry glanced at Millie as he moved back, away from Kingsley, toward the edge of the lane. "Looks as though there's nothing we can do."

"That's right, Mr. Harris. Just give me everything you've got. Both of you. All money and valuables." He faced them, the cyclist beside him, from the strip of grass edging the other side of the lane. "We'll leave you here, you and Mrs. Harris. By the time you climb to the top of the hill for help, we'll be far away."

As Kingsley talked, Harry took a quick look at the convertible and saw that the numbers on the license plate were hidden under smudges of dirt.

"Let's start with you, Mrs. Harris," Kingsley continued. "Everything you've got in your bag. Just drop it on the ground. My friend, here, will pick it up."

Benson looked at his wife and nodded. "Okay, honey. Let Mr. Kingsley have what's in your purse."

"Yes, dear. Whatever you say." She held up the white leather bag with her left hand and snapped the catch open.

Harry turned to watch the others again. Kingsley was still smiling. Harry kept his eyes on them while Millie pretended to search in her purse for the money. He saw Kingsley's smile turn to openmouthed surprise and the black-leather figure stiffen with shock. Without looking, he knew that Millie had the revolver in her hand.

"What're you doing?" Kingsley demanded.

There was the sharp crack of a shot, echoing through the canyons. The cyclist screamed and stumbled back, clutching his arm.

Kingsley started toward the convertible. Another shot. Kingsley stopped short.

"One more step, Mr. Kingsley, and you'll get it in the leg," Harry warned. "My wife's a crack shot. That one was only a warning. Get away from that car. Back to the end of this lane, both of you. Step on

it!" he commanded the two youths.

The two men moved together toward the edge of the canyon, but their eyes stayed on Millie's revolver.

"That's it! Stand right there. Just turn around and look down into that valley."

"You're not going to shoot us in the back!" Kingsley was whining now, genuinely frightened.

"Wouldn't do a thing like that! Just stand perfectly still." He reached into Millie's handbag and brought out a roll of adhesive tape. "My wife has all sorts of things in this purse of hers. Everything we might need for an emergency. Things you wouldn't believe!" He unrolled the first strip of adhesive, already cut to a convenient length. "Drop your wristwatches at your feet." He waited until the two expensive watches were on the grass. "Now hold your arms behind you, Mr. Kingsley. Both arms. Hands close together."

"What're you going to do?" Kingsley started to look around.

Another shot from Millie's revolver.

Kingsley instantly thrust his hands in back of him.

"That's more like it." Harry wrapped the strip of adhesive around both wrists, pulling it tight, neatly and expertly; around and around. Next he nudged the black-

leather figure. "Hands in back."

He saw that blood was seeping through a small gap in the leather sleeve, as he repeated the wrist-binding operation with another strip of adhesive.

"What is this?" the cyclist protested, turning to Kingsley. "You said they were suckers."

"I was wrong."

Harry pulled a third strip of adhesive from the metal roll and sealed the cyclist's mouth with it. Another strip covered Kingsley's lips.

He slipped the roll of adhesive into his pocket and began to search the two men, dropping each item he found into Millie's open handbag: a thick wallet, expensive tie clip and diamond ring from Kingsley; less from the cyclist—a cheap wallet and, from around his neck, some kind of antique medallion on a gold chain that Harry unfastened skillfully. Last of all he scooped up the two heavy wristwatches from the grass.

Millie returned the revolver to her bag and snapped it shut.

"All right!" Harry ordered. "Stand there. Don't make a move!" He lunged forward, both hands thrust out, and pushed Kingsley over the edge of the canyon.

The cyclist tried to escape but Harry caught him, twisted his arm, shoving him toward the canyon and,

without any qualms, over the rim.

For a moment the Bensons could hear the two bodies rolling down, rocks crashing, dry underbrush snapping. Then there was silence.

Harry turned and went behind the car to the motorcycle. He lifted it from its rest and rolled the heavy machine to the edge of the canyon. With one tremendous shove he sent it after the men.

He turned, smiling, and took Millie's arm as they started back to the convertible. They got in, Harry at the wheel. "Check how much money we got, honey."

Millie brought out the two wallets and went through them quickly; three hundred and ten in Kingsley's wallet, only fifteen in the other. "Three hundred and twenty-five bucks. Not a bad haul. And his name is Hanson, Charles Albert Hanson . . ."

"That diamond ring's worth at least five hundred. The watches another couple of hundred. That's better than we did in Acapulco or Panama. We'll get rid of the jewelry when we reach the Orient. Should bring a better price than in New York." He leaned over and kissed his wife on the cheek before he turned the ignition key, backed the convertible into the drive beside the vacant house and started up the sloping lane to the top of the hill. "I'll park on a side street in

Hollywood and leave the key in the ignition. Someone will steal the car in half an hour. Be sure and wipe your side of the car clean," Harry reminded her. "Anything you touched."

"Don't I always?"

"I'll take care of this side. Steering wheel. Door handle . . ." He slowed the convertible as it reached the road at the top of the lane. No sign of any traffic. He turned the car back in the direction they had come, along the crests of the hills, toward a spectacular sunset.

"Isn't that lovely!" Millie exclaimed. "So peaceful . . ."

Louis Bonnard, in a clean white mess jacket, stood with some of the other stewards at the ship's rail, watching the passengers come aboard after their day ashore.

The hidden speakers were now blaring "San Francisco" because that would be their next port of call before starting across the Pacific to Honolulu.

He saw that some of the passengers, as usual, had been drinking too much; laughing and stumbling; wives helping their husbands up the gangplank.

The first to return were always the ones in the chartered buses. Anyone who missed his bus had to hire a taxi to get back to the ship.

The rich people in their black

limousines would be the last to return. Some would arrive just before the cruise ship sailed. One man had been left behind at Panama and had to take a plane to Acapulco. Didn't matter, of course, if you were rich.

All the passengers would go to their cabins, freshen up and change their clothes, then hurry to the bon voyage party that was already going strong in the nightclub, the dining rooms and bars. They would eat and drink until they couldn't hold any more. He would, as usual, have to help some of them to their cabins and put them to bed.

He watched as each of his charges climbed the gangplank, curious to see what condition they were in. It was his responsibility, if any didn't return before sailing time, to report their absence to the purser.

Mr. and Mrs. Benson were coming up the gangplank, smiling and happy-looking. They must have had a pleasant day ashore. No criminal types had bothered them in this port. He would worry about them when they reached the Orient.

Benson noticed him and nudged

his wife, and both of them waved.

One day soon, while the Bensons were ashore, he would look into the secret compartment in that large suitcase they had brought aboard in New York, with their other luggage. He had noticed it several days ago, when he moved the bags for the maid to clean. He'd felt something shift inside but, later, when he opened the bag it was empty. That was when he noticed an extra thickness of leather at the bottom. There had been no time to look for the hidden opening.

He would do that when they reached the Orient, to see what was hidden inside; probably cash or traveler's checks. He would take a little of the money, maybe a few hundred dollars if he were lucky, and several traveler's checks. None of the passengers had ever missed anything he had taken. He could sign the checks because he always got signatures from each passenger soon after they came aboard; easy to copy.

Louis watched the Bensons as they disappeared inside the liner.

Such innocent types . . .



I suggest that overtime work is considered a shortcut to getting ahead.



I DON'T UNDERSTAND IT



by
Bill Pronzini

WELL, I'd been on the road for two days, riding on the produce trucks from El Centro to Bakersfield, when a refrigerator van picked me up and took me straight through to the Salinas Valley. They let me out right where I was headed, too, in front of this dirt road about three miles the other side of San Sinandro.

I stood there on the side of the road, hanging onto the tan duffel with my stuff in it, and it was plenty hot all right, just past noon, and the sun all yellow and hazed over. I looked at the big wood sign that was stuck up there, and it said: **JENSEN PRODUCE—PICKERS WANTED**, and had a black arrow pointing off down the dirt road. That was the name of the place, sure enough.

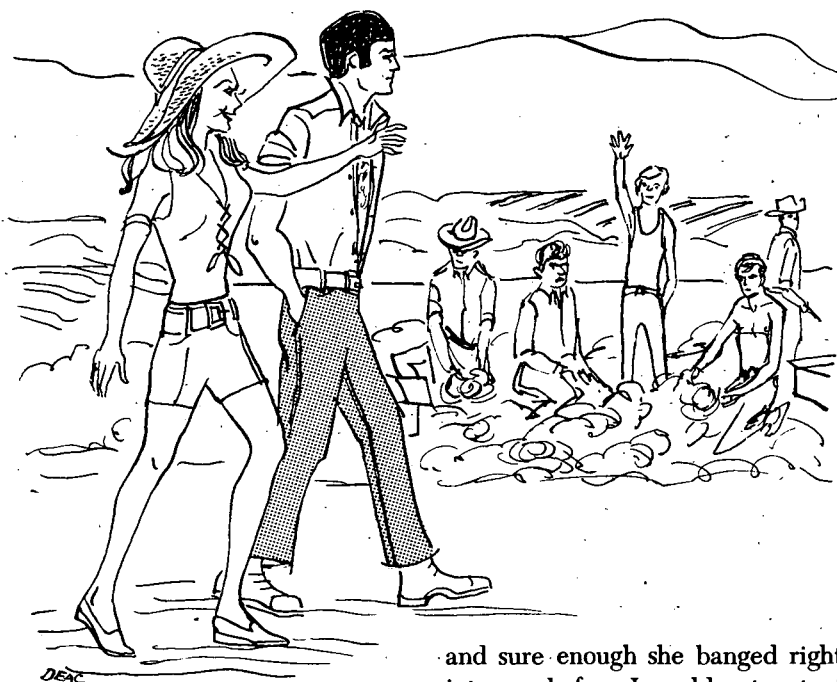
I started up the dirt road, and it was pretty dry and dusty. Off on both sides you could see the rows and rows of lettuce shining nice and green in the sun, and the pickers hunched over in there. Most of them looked like Mex's, but here and there was some college boys that are always around to pick in the spring and summer months.

Pretty soon I come over a rise and I could see a wide clearing. There was a big white house set back a ways, and down in front an area that was all paved off. On one side was a big corrugated-iron

warehouse, the sun coming off the top of that iron roof near to blinding you, it was so bright. About six flatbeds, a couple of Jimmy pickups and a big white Lincoln was sitting beside the warehouse. All of them had JENSEN PRODUCE done up

I walked across to the big warehouse. Both of the doors in front was shut, but there was a smaller one to the left and it was standing wide open.

Just as I come up to that door, this woman come out, facing inside,



in these big gold and blue letters on the door.

I come down there onto the asphalt part. Just to my right was four long, flat buildings made of wood, but with corrugated roofs. I knew that was where the pickers put down.

and sure enough she banged right into me before I could get out of the way. I stumbled back and dropped the duffel.

She come around and looked at me. She said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't see you there."

Well, she was about the most beautiful woman I ever saw in my whole life. She had this long dark

hair and green eyes with little gold flecks in them, and she was all brown and tan and her skin shined in the sun like she had oil rubbed on it. She had on a pair of white shorts and this white blouse with no sleeves. Her hands was in little fists on her hips, and she was smiling at me real nice and friendly. She said, "Well, I don't think I've seen you before."

I couldn't say nothing right then. I mean, I never been much good around the women anyway—I can't never think of nothing to talk to them about—and this one was so pretty she could've been in them Hollywood pictures.

My ears felt all funny and hot, with her looking right into my face like she was. But I couldn't just stand there, so I kind of coughed a little and bent down and picked up the duffel.

I said, "No, ma'am."

"I'm Mrs. Jensen. Is there something I can do for you?"

"Well, I heard you needed pickers."

"Yes, we do," she said. "The hot weather came on before we expected it. We have to harvest before the heat ruins the crop and we're awfully shorthanded."

I started to say something about being glad to help out, but just then this big good-looking fellow in a blue work shirt that had the sleeves

rolled up and was unbuttoned down the front so you could see all the hair he had on his chest, he come out of the door. The woman turned and saw him and said, "Oh, this is Mr. Carbante. He's our foreman."

I said, "How are you, Mr. Carbante?"

"Okay," he said. "You looking for work?"

"Sure."

"Ever picked lettuce before?"

"No, sir. But I picked plenty of other things."

"Such as?"

"Well, citrus."

"Where?"

"Down in the Imperial Valley."

"What else?"

"Tomatoes. Grapes and apples and celery, too."

"All right," Mr. Carbante said. "You're on."

"I sure do thank you."

This Mrs. Jensen was still standing there with her hands on her hips. She looked at me. "I'm sorry again about that bump."

"Oh, it's nothing."

"Good luck."

"Thanks."

"I'll see you later, Gino," she said to Mr. Carbante.

"Okay, Mrs. Jensen."

When she was gone, around to the side, Mr. Carbante took me into the warehouse. They had a criss-cross of conveyer belts in there, and

packing bins lining one wall, and there was a lot of Mex women that was sorting out the lettuce heads and putting the good ones off on one belt to where they was trimmed and graded and packed, and putting the ones that wasn't any good off on another belt.

We went into a little office they had there, and Mr. Carbante give me a little book to keep track of how many crates I was to pick, and told me what they paid for each crate. Then he said what bunkhouse I was to sleep in and the bunk number and what time they give you supper and what time you had to be up and ready for work in the morning.

He just finished telling me all that when this old bird come into the office. He had a nice head of white hair and pink cheeks, and he stopped where we was and give me a smile. He must've been close to seventy, sure enough, but his eyes was bright and he looked to get around pretty good.

Mr. Carbante said, "This is Mr. Jensen. He's the owner."

"How do you do, Mr. Jensen?"

"Glad to know you, son. You going to work for us?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that's fine."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you want to see me, Mr. Jensen?" Mr. Carbante asked.

"Have you seen Mrs. Jensen?"

"Not since breakfast."

"All right, Gino," Mr. Jensen said, and he went on out.

I said, "Mrs. Jensen was right here with you, Mr. Carbante."

"Never mind, boy."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Is that Mrs. Jensen's husband?"

Mr. Carbante's eyes got all narrow. "That's right. Why?"

"Well, nothing," I said, but I was wondering how come old Mr. Jensen was to have such a young wife. People sure do funny things sometimes, specially when they get old.

Mr. Carbante said, "You just mind your own business and pick your quota every day, and you'll get along fine here. You understand that, boy?"

"Sure, Mr. Carbante."

"Okay, then. You'll be down on the south side. There's a couple of Mex's out there who'll give you the hang of it."

Do you know how they pick lettuce?

The way you do it is, you have this long knife, real sharp, and you walk in along the rows, which are about two feet apart, and you clip off the heads in close to the ground and put them in these field crates you drag along with you. When you get a crate filled, you leave it in there between the rows and then a

truck comes along and picks up the crates and takes them up to the warehouse.

Now, it don't sound like much, me telling it like that, but there's plenty of little tricks to it, all right.

These two men that Mr. Carbante had told me about give me some tips on how to tell which heads was to be cut, and how to tell which ones had been chewed up by the aphids, and which ones had got the mildew or been burnt by the sun. I took to watching this one big fellow, whose name was Haysoos. He was pretty near pure black from the sun, and had tiny little eyes and thick, bushy eyebrows. But he sure knew what he was doing in that lettuce, clipping away like nobody you ever saw.

After I watched him for a while, I got onto the knack of it and started right in myself. I had my shirt off out there, and it was plenty hot. I was burnt up pretty good from being down in the Imperial Valley, but down there you was working citrus and didn't have to pick right in under the sun like that.

Just as I got my first field crate filled up, who should come down the road but Mrs. Jensen and Mr. Carbante. They was just strolling along, side by side, her with this big floppy straw hat stuck up on her head. She was smiling, and every now and then she would wave to

one of the pickers out in the lettuce. Every one of them was looking at her, sure enough.

She got up to where me and Haysoos was working and stopped and give me a nice smile. "Hello, there."

"Hello, Mrs. Jensen."

"How are you doing?"

"Just fine."

This Haysoos smiled at her with teeth that was all yellow and said something in Mex, but I guess she didn't hear him. She started off down the road again. Haysoos watched her. "*Muy bonita*, hey? Such a beautiful woman, a man's blood boils at the sight of such a beautiful woman."

"She sure is beautiful, all right," I said.

"She likes you, hey *amigo*?"

"She's real nice and friendly."

"Haysoos she does not like. Not big ugly Haysoos."

"Oh, sure she likes you, Haysoos."

"Carbante is who she likes, hey? Carbante and a thousand others."

He turned away and started in to pick again. I didn't know what he'd meant, but I didn't want to say nothing so I just turned away too and went to work in my own row.

The next day I was pretty sore from the stooping over, but I'd had a nice sleep the night before and it didn't bother me too much. I'd got

the hang of picking the lettuce now, and I was clipping along at a nice pace.

One of the trucks come around with sandwiches and milk for us at noontime, and we sat there on the side of the road to eat. Well, while we was eating, here come Mrs. Jensen down the road again.

She come right up there to where we was, smiling at everybody, and asked us if we all had enough to eat. Some of the college boys called out some things I didn't understand, and most everybody laughed, and Mrs. Jensen laughed right with them.

This Haysoos was sitting right near where I was. He kept watching Mrs. Jensen. "Everyone but Haysoos, hey?" he said.

"How was that?"

"A man's blood boils."

He sure said a lot of funny things, that Haysoos.

Saturday come around before you knew it and that was when we was to get paid. After supper we all went to the office in the big warehouse with the little books we had and old Mr. Jensen and Mr. Carbante totaled up the number of crates we had picked and give us our pay, all in cash money.

When we was all paid, old Mr. Jensen stood up and said that he was going off to Salinas for the next

few days on business, and that Mr. Carbante was to be in charge and if we wanted anything we should see him. After that he went out and got into his big Lincoln and drove off down the road.

I went back to the bunks then, but most of the other pickers, they was going off into San Sinandro to drink in the bars. A couple of them asked me if I wanted to come along, but I said I wasn't much for the drinking.

I lay down on my bunk and started to read this movie magazine one of the college boys had. I sure like to read them movie magazines, all about the Hollywood people and the houses they have and the fine clothes and everything. Someday I'm going to have me all them things, too.

Well, I lay there and pretty soon it got dark outside. But it was awful hot in there and I got up and went out to get some air. It sure hadn't cooled down much.

I walked down by the other bunks and come around the south end of the second one, and I heard all this commotion inside. There was a window right there and I stopped by that and looked inside to see what it was all about.

There was this bunch of pickers in there, about six of them, and they was all pretty well oiled up. They had a couple of empty wine jugs ly-

ing around on the floor, and they was passing this other one around from one to another.

And who should be right there in the middle of all of them but Haysoos. He was sitting on one of the bunks, his eyes all glassed over. He got the jug and took a long one out of there, and it passed on to the next one. He wasn't whooping it up or nothing, like the rest of them was, but just sitting there on that bunk, kind of staring at the floor.

Well, while I watched, the rest of them started out the door and one had the wine jug. They called back to Haysoos, but he just sat there and didn't answer them at all. Then Haysoos was alone, and I heard the rest of them going off down the road singing some kind of Mex song.

Old Haysoos found another jug somewhere and had one you would hardly believe from it. He wiped off his mouth with the back of his hand and then stood up and wobbled around some. I could see his lips moving like he was talking to himself, but I couldn't hear none of it.

I got tired of watching him and went back to my bunk and lay down again, and it wasn't so hot anymore. Pretty soon I went to sleep.

I woke up right away when I

heard the sirens. They was really loud.

I jumped off my bunk and run outside, and there was a lot of the other pickers there, too, just come back from San Sinandro. They was all running up toward the big white house.

I commenced to running up there with them, and I thought how it must be that the big white house had caught fire somehow and what a terrible thing that would be. But when I got up there, I saw that it wasn't fire engines that had made the sirens, but police cars. There was three of them there, and a big ambulance, and they all had these red lights going round and round on their tops. There was a couple of policemen, too, holding the pickers back and telling them not to come any closer.

I wedged in there, and the pickers that had been there for a while was talking pretty fast.

"... right there in the bedroom."

"She had it coming."

"They both did."

"Yeah, but not *that* way."

"Who found them?"

"Somebody heard the screams."

"But they didn't get him?"

"Not yet."

"He must have gone through the fields."

"They've got the roads blocked."

"We'll get up a posse . . ."

I said to one of the college boys who had been talking, "What is it? What happened?"

"You don't know?"

I said, "I was sleeping. What is it?"

Just then the front door of the big white house opened and two fellows dressed in white and two policemen come out and they was carrying two stretchers. They had to pass by where I was to get to the ambulance, and I looked at the two sheet-covered stretchers and what was on them.

I just couldn't believe it at first, but the college boys was talking again, telling about it, and I knew it had to be true. I turned away, sick as anybody ever was.

The one college boy put his hand on my shoulder. "Come on," he

said, "we're going after him . . ."

But I pulled away and run back to the bunks. I had to get away from there. I couldn't stay there no more.

You know what that crazy Haysoos had done?

He'd killed Mrs. Jensen and Mr. Carbante; that's what. He'd gone up to the big white house with that sharp, sharp lettuce knife of his and cut off both their heads.

I don't understand it, and I'm just so sick. A fine lady like Mrs. Jensen and a nice man like Mr. Carbante. Two of the swellest people you ever wanted to meet and know, and that crazy Haysoos had killed them both.

I just don't understand what could have made him do a terrible, terrible thing like that.

Do you?

» » » » » » » » WATCH OUT « « « « « « « «

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It is evident that one should never lend anything to a stranger that he could not borrow from a friend.



The Loan

opener. Monday night, around eleven-thirty, I was heading for the pajama drawer when I saw the envelope.

It was lying near the edge of this table, and it was so creamy white it

ARE YOU a doctor? Good! I've been going nuts trying to make these thickheaded cops understand. Did you hear what they said I did? Tried to shoot a kid! Kill a little kid, for the love of Mikel! Look at me, please. Do I look like some kind of maniac? Do I?

Okay, I didn't mean to shout. I've told the story a dozen times, once more won't hurt.

It started about two weeks ago. I live alone, in an apartment on East 87th Street, one room and a can



practically glowed. When I picked it up, it felt more like cloth than paper, and so did the letter inside. But that wasn't the strangest part. It was what the letter said:

Dear Mr. Wetmore:

My name is Anson Fowler, and I am Assistant Chief of the Bureau of Science, Department of Time, New York. You are presently residing in the space-time zone which will be occupied by one of the four Hungerford Displacement units which will be operating in the year 2153. I have taken the liberty of researching past tenancy records to determine your identity, and hope that you will cooperate in a matter important to scientific progress.

I will make no attempt to describe the operation of the Hungerford apparatus; but ask you to accept the fact that the unit is capable of making "time transfers" of certain articles. The letter you are now holding is one of these, and it may be returned to me in the same manner in which it arrived. Do not attempt to retain this letter, as it is chemically composed to dissolve within a few hours.

In its present state of development, the Displacement unit is not capable of making human "time transfers" and it is current scientific theory that such transfers will never be possible; the paradoxical consequences may already be familiar

to you. However, several experiments have shown that it is possible to displace human consciousness over different time periods. In plain terms, it is possible for a man of my century to occupy the physical being of a man of yours. The process is neither complex nor damaging, but there is one vital condition: the subject must be completely willing.

Therefore, will you allow me to occupy your body for a period of not more than forty-eight hours? I guarantee that no harm shall come to you as a result of this experiment. In exchange for the loan, I will "transfer" a unit of gold worth approximately ten thousand dollars in your time.

If you are agreeable to this, merely make a notation on the bottom of this letter and return it to the place in which it appeared. I will then send further instructions.

Sincerely,

Dr. Anson Fowler

Sure, I knew the letter was a gag, but I figured I'd never learn the punch line if I didn't cooperate. So on the bottom I wrote "Nuts to you." Then I put the letter back on the table, and went to bed.

In the morning the letter was gone.

Yes, that's right—gone, vanished. It was creepy, all right, and what was worse, an envelope was back

on the table when I got home from work on Tuesday.

It contained a second letter:

Dear Mr. Wetmore:

Naturally, I am disappointed by your reply. Let me assure you again that the Displacement process is in no way injurious. All you need do is take a sedative which I will prescribe in the pharmaceutical terms of your day; this will make the Displacement swift and painless. You will waken in forty-eight hours, once more in full possession of your body.

I am sure you must see the value of this experiment to scientific progress. Please accept my sincere appeal.

Needless to say, I didn't accept. I was beginning to think there was something real about this crazy proposition, and I wasn't taking any chances.

Yes, there was another letter that night:

Dear Mr. Wetmore:

I have just learned that there is some difficulty in your time period about the possession of gold. If this method of payment does not suit you, I have an alternative to suggest. I will spend a portion of my time in your era obtaining your present currency through the sale of some precious gems. This will enable me to leave a large amount of usable cash on my departure. I

would estimate that amount as approximately fifty thousand 20th Century dollars. I can assure you that the transaction will be most profitable to us both.

I eagerly await your reply.

I don't know. There was something about the last letter that made the whole proposition seem practical and down-to-earth. The man wanted to borrow something from me, and he wanted to pay hard cash for it. My financial state was never a happy one, and the offer had a certain crass appeal. I didn't put the letter back on the table until the next morning, Thursday. Just before I left the house I wrote "Yes" on the bottom.

That night, the letter had an enclosure.

Dear Mr. Wetmore:

Thank you for your agreement. Enclosed is a prescription for the harmless sedative you will require. I would appreciate your filling it today, and letting me know when you intend taking it.

Once more, let me assure you that I shall treat your body with every care and consideration.

I filled the prescription at the corner drugstore. When I asked the pharmacist about it, he said it was potent, but not dangerous in the moderate dose indicated. I took the stuff home. On the bottom of Fowler's letter, I wrote: "Friday, eleven

p.m." Then I put it on the table, and sat up to watch.

This time, I saw it happen. About four in the morning, bleary-eyed, I saw the white envelope begin to glow. Then, vroom, it was gone!

Friday night, at eleven o'clock, I took the capsule.

I woke in my own bed, in my own pajamas, and except for a furry tongue and an overweight head, I felt normal enough. It seemed as if nothing had happened at all. I got out of bed, put on a pot of coffee, and went to the front door. One look at the *Times* on the mat, and I knew that I had been Displaced, all right, but good.

It was dated Monday, October 9.

Talk about lost weekends, I *really* lost that one. The next thoughts I had were practical. I hurried back into the bedroom, stripped off my p.j.'s, and examined every inch of me for signs of either change or damage. There was nothing. Also, either the payment was delayed, or Dr. Fowler had welshed on me.

All I had for breakfast was a cup of black coffee. It was then that I picked up the *Times* and saw my picture on the front page. Not my photograph, just a police sketch, but it was so good that there wasn't any doubt. Below the sketch:

HUNT MAN IN SHOOTING;
INVALID, 6, UNHARMED

A brutal and seemingly senseless attack upon a bedridden child has aroused the city.

The child, 6-year-old Conrad Schieff of 289 Boyer Street, Manhattan, was the victim of a shooting attack in his own home. Prompt action by the boy's father saved the child's life. The assailant, believed to be deranged, escaped capture and is the object of a city-wide hunt.

The attack came at 3:15 p.m. Sunday, when a stranger gained admittance to the apartment rented by Herman Schieff, a lathe operator employed by the Donnelly Machine Co. Introducing himself as a "health officer," he entered the child's bedroom. Young Conrad had been taken ill the day before with a slight fever.

Upon entering, the stranger drew a revolver, later identified as being recently purchased from a pawnshop on Canal Street. He aimed the weapon point-blank at the child, and fired. Herman Schieff struck his arm, deflecting the bullet and knocking the weapon out of the man's hand. The man then fled the apartment and disappeared.

Schieff's detailed description enabled a police artist to make what Schieff called an "accurate" sketch of the assailant.

A police physician found the boy suffering only slightly from the shock of the assault, but remarked

upon the unusual darkening of his fingernails. The child has been taken to New York Hospital for observation.

An hour after that, the police showed up.

But that's what you've got to understand, Doc. It wasn't *me* who fired that gun, it was only this body of mine—and Fowler was in it, not me.

Yes, I heard the boy died. But you can't blame that on me, can you? Or even Fowler? It was the boy's illness that killed him, wasn't it?

Listen to me. I've been thinking about this nutty business every minute, trying to figure out what it all means—and I've got a theory. Will you listen to me?

Maybe there was a hidden motive in what Fowler was doing. Maybe it wasn't just an experiment, maybe he was really trying to *change the past*. I know that sounds crazy—it can't be done. Maybe that's why he failed, that's why he didn't succeed in killing Conrad Schieff. He tried, but he couldn't.

Why did he try? The only thing I can think of is this: The boy died of some disease the doctors don't understand, isn't that right? I mean, those funny symptoms he had, that low fever, the way his fingernails turned black.

Oh, you're the one who examined the kid. Well, what do *you* think? What killed him? Do you know? Does anybody know?

That's what I mean. Maybe the kid had some kind of *new* disease. Something bad, something deadly, something we don't know how to cure. And what if it's contagious? I mean *really* contagious?

I'm talking about a plague, Doc.

What if there were a plague so terrible that it practically wiped out the human race? Wouldn't that be something a man from the future might want to change?

I'm sorry. I can see what you're thinking, it's written all over you. Okay, it's screwy. But it's an answer. I've got to have *some* answer, don't I? Look, can I have one of your cigarettes? Thanks.

My God, Doc. Your fingernails!



When Utopia is finally within one's grasp, he may, unfortunately, lose his feeling for it.



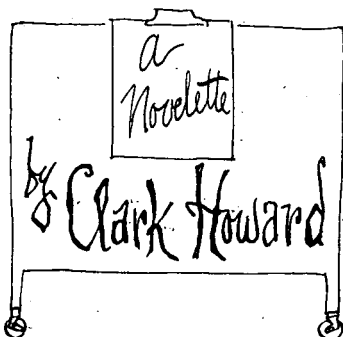
The BITTER Pill

MILTON WAS ON his way back from the unemployment office when he noticed the woman in the big Cadillac driving behind him. Not only was she following too closely, she wasn't even paying attention to the road. Instead, she was leaning over to look into the rear-view mirror to pat the front of her hair in place.

Milton shook his head irritably.

Look at her, he thought. Too interested in her looks to watch where she's driving. All dolled up with a fur piece around her neck and it isn't even October. Driving a car that probably cost more to insure than the unemployment office gives me to live on—

It was then, thinking about the cost of insuring that car, that Milton got the idea. He wasn't sure what made him think of it; maybe it was the forty-five-dollar unemployment check in his coat pocket, or the nine-year-old jalopy he was driving, or the fact that he hadn't worked in nearly five months. Or maybe it was just that fur piece around the woman's neck. What-



ever the reason, the idea framed itself in his mind and focused there unchallenged, and Milton knew without further thought that he was going to do it.

He slowed down a little, gradually, just enough to let the big car get closer to him, and kept flicking his eyes up to glance in his own rear-view mirror; the woman continued to drive with one hand while she leaned over to primp with the other. Milton waited until they were in the middle of a block, with no approaching traffic, no pedestrians paying attention to them, and only intermittent parked cars along the right-hand curb. He waited until he felt everything was right: time, place, everything. Then he stomped down hard on his brake pedal, braced himself as his old car tightened and skidded, and a split instant later felt the woman's car plow into him from behind.

At the moment of impact, Milton let his body go limp. He was snapped lightly back against the seat, then pitched forward into the steering wheel. When he hit the wheel, it felt as if someone had given him a stiff forearm across the chest. It reminded him of the time he had tried out for the freshman football team in college. He hadn't made the team, or for that matter anything else in college; he had dropped out in the middle of his

second year to find better things.

After the breath had been punched out of him, he coughed several times and curled both arms around the steering wheel. He leaned his head forward. The immediate memory of crashing metal was pushed from his mind by the present sound of breaking glass. *Part of the Cadillac's headlight falling out*, he thought. He heard a car door slam behind him. From in front, off to the right, there was the sound of footsteps hurrying across pavement. Milton swallowed dryly. He became aware of a burning sensation across his chest. Suddenly his car door was jerked open.

"You okay, mac?" an urgent voice asked.

Milton clenched his jaw. "My back," he said through gritted teeth. "I can't—move my back . . ."

At the hospital he was given an injection of something and a few moments later the pain across his chest had subsided completely. He felt warm, relaxed, even a little light-headed. Under instructions from a resident doctor, he was undressed, put into a hospital gown and wheeled quickly into the X-ray lab.

"Is my back broken?" he asked, his voice thickening from the shot.

"You'll have to ask the doctor about that," said the X-ray tech-

nician. She came over and moved one of his arms. Above him a large lens slowly torpedoed down from the ceiling.

"Why can't I feel anything?" he asked.

"They gave you something for the pain, I imagine. Lie quietly now, please . . ."

Milton closed his eyes. For several moments the silence in the room was interrupted periodically by sharp, metallic clicks as the technician, in her protective room, manipulated the controls of the X-ray unit. Gradually the noise faded to nothingness as Milton drifted into a light sleep.

When he awoke he was in a restraining back brace, lying on a hospital bed. The bed was in a small private room, and the door to the corridor was open. Milton listened intently for a moment; the only sounds of activity seemed to be coming from down the hall. He turned as far to one side as the brace would allow and managed to reach the bedside telephone. The disk on the dial read *Room 407*. Milton picked up the receiver and dialed the operator.

"I'd like to make an outside call, please," he said when he reached the switchboard.

"I'll give you an outside line, sir."

A moment later he was dialing his home. Lois, his wife, answered

after something like the fifth ring.

"It's me," he said quietly.

"What are you trying to pull now, Milton?" she asked. "I just had a call telling me you'd been admitted to some hospital."

"I have. I'm in Community Hospital right now."

"So you're in Community Hospital right now. So what are you trying to pull?"

"Did it ever occur to you that I might have had a legitimate accident?" Milton said irritably. "That I might be seriously injured, even dying?"

"You die? Don't make me laugh, Milton. Incidentally, where's the unemployment check?"

"Never mind that!" he snapped. "Now listen to me, Lois: I've been in an automobile accident—"

"Did you cash that unemployment check and go out drinking?" she demanded.

"Will you shut up and *listen!*" Milton implored. "I may have a serious back injury, Lois; I may be laid up for quite a while—"

"I get it, Milton. Now I see. Your unemployment is running out so now you're going to get on disability, right? You never plan to work again, right?"

"Lois," he pleaded almost frantically, "cut out the smart mouth! I don't have all day. Someone could come down the hall any minute—"

"All right, what do you want? And make it quick because *As the World Turns* comes on in five minutes."

"Look," he lowered his voice secretively, "I want you to get hold of that girlfriend of yours, Stella whatever-her-name-is—"

"Stella Waslewski? The one that spilled the beer in your lap at the New-Year's Eve party?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Find out from her the name of the lawyer who handled her brother-in-law's case when he slipped on the ice in front of that department store—"

"That was her sister Wanda's husband, wasn't it? The one who collected fifty thousand dollars for something being wrong with his back." Lois paused thoughtfully for a moment. "So that's it."

"Yes, that's it. Now you forget about your stupid TV serial and locate this guy for me as quick as you can. See if he'll come over to the hospital right away."

"Sure, Milton, sure," she said, now in a deferential tone. "I'll do whatever you say." She paused again. "Milton?"

"What?"

"Stella's sister Wanda's husband bought her a new car for her very own when he got his settlement. Do you suppose—"

"You just do what I say, Lois," he promised, "and I'll see that you get

the sportiest set of wheels on the market."

Bicycle wheels, he thought as he hung up. *She can peddle around the block while I'm jetting to Miami—one-way.*

He put the phone back in place and lay back flat on the bed. He became aware that his chest was hurting again where he had hit the steering wheel. Reaching beside him on the bed, he pressed the call button for the nurse. When he heard her footsteps coming toward the open door, he began moaning. "Nurse—my back—my back—it's killing me—nurse—"

The attorney's name was Shide. Sitting by Milton's bed the next day, he asked questions in a quiet, businesslike voice and made notes of the answers. "About how many times did you look in your rear-view mirror and see the woman driver primping in her own mirror?"

"Three or four," Milton said.

"And you say she was making you nervous by following so closely?"

"Definitely. I could see that she wasn't paying any attention to her driving."

"Knowing she was following that closely, why did you stop as abruptly as you did?"

"I had to. A little girl ran off the

curb and into the street; I stopped because I thought she was going to run in front of me."

"I see." Shide pursed his lips and continued making notes. "You made a sudden stop to avoid hitting a child. Good, very good. Now then, let's go back to a few moments before the accident. You noticed that the driver behind you was proceeding in a careless manner; so careless, in fact, that you had become nervous. Why didn't you accelerate and get away from her?"

"To do that I would have had to violate the speed limit," Milton said with just a hint of self-righteousness.

"What was the speed limit?"

"Twenty-five miles per hour; it happened in a residential zone. I was going twenty-three or twenty-four at the time."

Shide nodded. "All right, you couldn't get away from her. Why didn't you pull to one side and allow her to pass?"

"There was only one lane for each direction of traffic," Milton said.

"Then why didn't you pull over and park?"

"Couldn't. Until we got into the block where she hit me, there were no parking places." Milton waited a moment, then said confidently, "Any more questions?"

"Not at the present," said Shide. "I'm sure if there are, you'll have the answers."

"You can bet on it," Milton replied.

The attorney rose. "I'll obtain a copy of the accident report and look into the background of the woman who hit you and check out her insurance and so on. I suppose you'll be remaining in the hospital?"

"I don't have much choice; it's agony to move, even an inch. I'm not too pleased with the resident doctor who's assigned to my case, though. He can't seem to find anything wrong with me. Says he's sure the pain will clear up in a few days. I've been thinking about getting a specialist, maybe that doctor who took care of the man who slipped on the ice—I can't think of his name—"

"Emerson," said Shide. "Dr. Luther Emerson. A very competent man."

After Shide left, Milton rolled onto his side, pulling the restraining brace with him, and stretched to reach the phone again.

"Lois," he said when his wife answered, "look up the number of a doctor named Luther Emerson. Call him and tell him your husband was in a collision and is suffering intense pains in his back. Tell him I'm not satisfied with the medical ser-

vice I'm getting and ask if he can please come to the hospital and examine me. While you're talking to him, mention casually that Shide is my lawyer."

"Sure, hon," said Lois, "I'll take care of it as soon as *Love of Life* is over."

"Do it now, Lois," Milton said, his nostrils flaring. "*Right* now, or daddy won't buy you the new toy you want."

He hung up, cursing the day he had met his wife. She had been a receptionist at one of the employment agencies he had gone to, looking for a job. The agency had found a job for him, as a theater manager trainee. After he started work he called Lois and took her to lunch. They started seeing each other regularly, then one thing led to another, and almost before he was aware of what was happening, they were married. A week later he lost the job the agency had helped him get.

When this thing is over, he silently swore, he was going to lose Lois too. For keeps. He'd had enough of her and her stupid television serials and those chocolate-covered cherries she wolfed down while she watched them—

"Good evening," said a velvety-smooth female voice. "How are you tonight?"

Milton looked up at a peaches-

and-cream nurse with honey-colored hair and a smile that made his neck feel warm.

"I'm suffering intense pain," he said. "Who are you?"

"Miss Lawlor, the night nurse." She looked at his medical chart. "You can have another pain pill in an hour. Would you like the television on to pass the time?"

"No, I have a bad headache. Would you mind massaging my forehead for a couple of minutes?"

"Not at all."

She leaned over and kneaded his brow with the tips of her fingers. When she did, Milton learned three things: that she wore no wedding ring, that according to the badge on her uniform her first name was Libby, and that she smelled like jasmine.

He closed his eyes and pictured her in a bikini . . . on a Florida beach . . . with him.

Dr. Luther Emerson had a habitual squint. Whether he was looking at a patient, a newspaper, or—as he was now—an X-ray picture, he squinted almost to the point of closing his eyelids entirely.

"What do you think this blur is?" he asked the hospital resident who had been treating Milton. They were standing before a portable backlighted viewer which had been wheeled in next to Milton's bed.

"I'd say just a little fibrous tissue in the muscle," the resident replied. Emerson squinted for a closer look.

"Perhaps. But might not it also be an inflammation of the sciatic nerve?"

"Well, it would have to be a very slight inflammation, and it would be most unusual, considering the type of accident the patient had—"

"And this?" Emerson interrupted. "What do you make of this?"

The resident looked where Emerson was indicating. "Just more fibrous tissue, Doctor—"

"Or the beginning of a lesion," countered Emerson. Abruptly he switched off the viewer. "Doctor," he said pleasantly, "you have done an excellent job of arresting Mr. Milton's pain and diagnosing the immediate results of his accident. At the patient's request, I will now assume primary responsibility for his treatment. Would you be good enough to inform the floor nurse and records office of the change?"

As he was talking, Emerson was also guiding the resident doctor gently through the door into the hall. A moment later, Emerson returned alone.

"Now then," he rubbed his hands together, "the first thing we must do is get you out of that restraining brace and into a relief brace to alleviate some of your agonizing pain.

I'll order that done first thing tomorrow. We'll also want an entire series of spinal examinations, X rays every other day, therapeutic massages—" He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "I'm afraid you're in for a rather extended hospitalization," he said tonelessly.

"I'll try to bear up under it, Doctor," Milton replied, thinking about the honey-haired night nurse named Libby Lawlor.

She came into his room an hour after supper. "How are you tonight, Mr. Milton?" she asked in her velvety voice.

"My head is hurting again," Milton said at once. Libby Lawlor walked toward the bed, smiling, making his neck feel warm again. He closed his eyes as she put her soft, gentle fingertips on his forehead.

"I think you're becoming spoiled," she said.

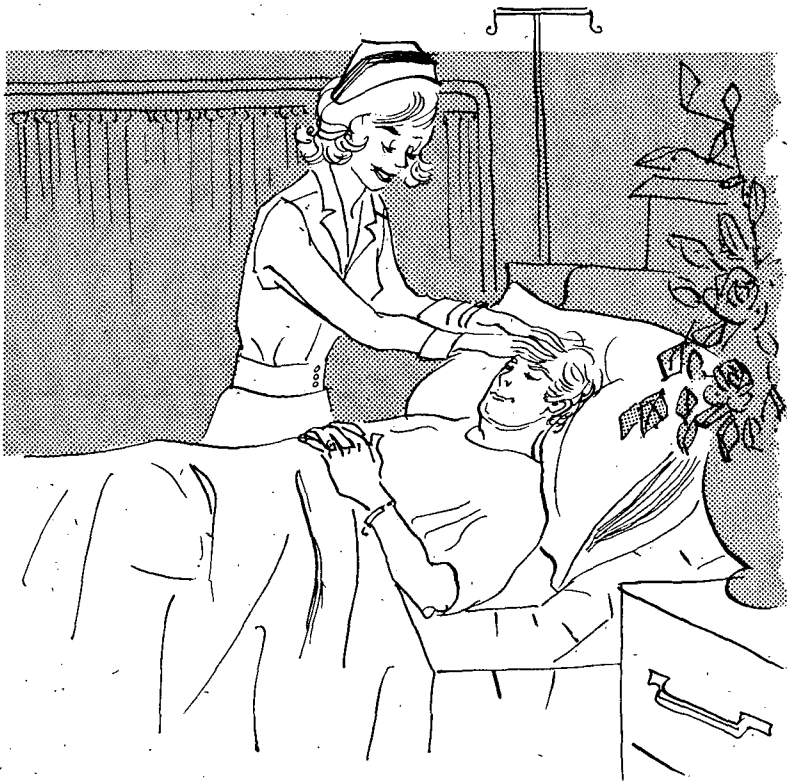
"Well, I may be in here for quite a while," he told her. "You do want me to be happy, don't you?"

"Oh, by all means. It's just that we're not supposed to play favorites among the patients."

"I won't tell if you won't," Milton said. He sighed quietly. "Do you believe in fate, Miss Lawlor? It is Miss Lawlor, isn't it?"

"Yes, to both questions. Why?"

"Why? I'll tell you why. When I was involved in that traffic acci-



dent, I was on my way to the airport to catch a plane to Miami. I was leaving this town for good." He opened his eyes. She was very close to him; the fragrance of jasmine teased his nostrils again. "Then an accident kept me here at the last minute. An accident that had me taken to this hospital, put on this floor, in this room. An accident, in other words, that caused you and me to meet before I could leave town and go somewhere else to live."

"What does that have to do with fate?" she asked.

"Simply this: suppose you and I, living here in the same city, had been destined to meet. Then I decided to move away, you see, altering the course of that destiny. Fate would have had no alternative but to step in and stop me; to find some way of throwing us together."

"I see." She took her hands away and stood up, smiling. "What makes you so sure it's I that fate

had in mind for you? Why not the cute little admittance clerk downstairs, or one of the day nurses—”

“None of them are in my sphere,” Milton said.

“Your what?”

“My sphere of interest,” he explained. “I had a friend at the university whose hobby was astrology. We shared a room and I picked up a lot about astrological fate and destiny from him. Take that cute little admittance clerk, for instance; she’s obviously not in my sphere of interest because I only saw her the one time and she made no impression at all on me. As for the day nurses, one of them is old enough to be my mother, and the other is already married.” He put what he fancied to be a poignant, significant look on his face, and lightly touched one of her hands. “It’s you, Libby Lawlor. Fate has ordained it.”

Libby smiled sweetly. “We’ll see,” she told him. “We’ll see.”

Shide, the attorney, was back the next day. “The woman who hit you,” he told Milton, “is Mrs. Franklin Leavitt. If you had to be hit by someone, she was certainly a good choice.”

“How good?” asked Milton.

“Very good,” said Shide. “Her husband is a diamond merchant, in business thirty years, top Dun and

Bradstreet rating. They live in a small mansion in Oakdale, employ two live-in servants, and own two Cadillac sedans and an Oldsmobile station wagon, all heavily insured.”

Milton smiled. “Nice.”

“There’s even a little bonus,” said the attorney. “Hazel—that’s the lady’s first name—has been cited twice during the past year for reckless driving; once she changed lanes without looking and sideswiped another car, and four months later she backed into a fire hydrant and tore it out of the sidewalk.”

“The woman’s a menace,” Milton said. “She shouldn’t be allowed on the street.”

“She won’t for a while,” Shide told him. “Her license was automatically suspended after the accident she had with you.”

“Serves her right. I’m lucky to be alive, the way she was driving.” He adjusted his position in the new relief brace, which allowed him to sit up. “What do we do now?” he wanted to know.

“Not much of anything at the present time,” said Shide. “I’ll file notice of a liability claim with their insurance carrier and send them a registered letter advising that we hold them responsible for your injuries. Then we wait for Dr. Emerson to complete his extensive tests and treatment and give us a professional opinion of your condition. If

it should turn out, as it likely will, that your injury is not permanently disabling but can be expected to cause you physical discomfort for an undertermined length of time, then we shall begin negotiations with the insurance company for the maximum amount of their liability."

"How much is that?" Milton asked eagerly.

"A hundred thousand."

Milton smiled.

"Don't expect to get that much, however," Shide added.

Milton frowned. "Why not? Why shouldn't I get that much?"

"Because you don't deserve it," Shide said simply. "You aren't permanently or severely injured. As a matter of fact, I'm not sure—" He stopped in midsentence.

"You aren't sure what?" Milton challenged.

"Nothing," the attorney replied. "As I was saying, I'll ask for a hundred thousand, they'll offer ten. The insurance company lawyer and I will dicker back and forth for a while; I'll come down a little, they'll come up a little—"

"Okay, okay, I get the picture," Milton said impatiently. "Where are we when the dickering stops?"

"Hopefully around sixty or sixty-five thousand. That's gross, of course."

Milton's eyes narrowed. "Mean-

ing what, pray, in plain English?"

"Meaning that Dr. Emerson's fee will be five thousand, and mine will be one-third of the balance."

"One-third! Kind of steep, aren't you?"

"That's the standard contingency arrangement," Shide said. He took a legal document from his briefcase. "This is a formal agreement of the terms between us. If you'll just sign both copies—"

"I don't know," Milton held out. "You're taking a pretty big slice of the pie."

"I'm also doing most of the baking," Shide dryly reminded him, "and you're still getting sixty-six percent of the pie, as you call it."

"I'm doing a hundred percent of the suffering, too," Milton retorted, trying to look pathetic.

Shide merely smiled. "Come now, Mr. Milton—"

"Besides," Milton argued, "what about the hospital bills?"

"They'll all be taken care of directly by the insurance company," Shide informed him. "The money we are discussing now is what we will get in the way of damages for negligence. Your share should come to about forty thousand."

Milton cocked his head slightly to one side. "Forty thousand, huh? All mine? I don't have to pay anything out of it?"

"All yours, Mr. Milton," Shide assured him.

Milton pondered for a moment longer, then snatched the agreement from the lawyer's hand and quickly signed it. "I still think I'm giving you quite a bit of my money," he grumbled.

"Well, look at it this way, Mr. Milton," Shide said. "For the rest of your life you can boast about what a generous man you are." He took the signed contract and put it into his briefcase. "I'll keep you posted from time to time on the legal end," he said, rising to leave. "Meanwhile, good luck with your, uh, treatments and all."

"Yeah, sure," Milton said absently.

As Shide left, Milton glanced at his bedside clock and noted that he had only three hours to wait until Libby Lawlor came on duty.

In the days that followed, Dr. Emerson visited him every weekday morning for periods ranging from four to six minutes.

"Good morning, how are you this morning, Mr. Milton?" he would ask.

For the first couple of weeks Milton did little more than grunt in reply, but soon he had familiarized himself with the condition for which he was being treated and he began giving more meaningful an-

swers designed to help the doctor.

"The torticollis is becoming more pronounced," he would say one day, or, "The sudden muscle contractions are increasing," or, "I may have the beginning of an infectious lymph gland."

"Ah, well, we must do something about that," the doctor would say at once. "Do you think the heat treatments are helping any?"

"No," Milton would answer, because he did not like the heat treatments.

"How about the whirlpool?"

"I could stand another half hour or so of that," he would agree. "And have them wheel me into the solarium earlier in the day, will you? There's a pyelitis patient over in B Wing that plays a fair game of gin rummy."

"Consider it done," Emerson would say. Then he would clear his throat, look at his watch, and be gone for the day.

Milton would be left in relative peace until two-thirty in the afternoon. That was when Lois came to visit.

"I can't understand why I can only visit you in the afternoons," she would complain. "What's wrong with the evening visiting hours?"

"I told you, I take heat treatments then," Milton would lie, thinking about trim, peaches-and-

cream Libby Lawlor. At times like those he was always acutely aware of Lois' hardening complexion and the pounds she was putting on from her insatiable craving for chocolate-covered cherries.

"I'd like evenings better," she would go on. "I haven't been able to watch *Days of Our Lives* or *Secret Storm* since you got in here."

"How have you been able to stand it?" Milton would say with mock pity. Then he would go into his tirade. "You know what your problem is, Lois—you don't have any feeling for anyone else's suffering. If you knew the physical agony I go through day after day—"

"Cut it out, Milton, please, you're bringing tears to my eyes. Has the lawyer said yet how much money we'll get?"

"We should clear about fifteen thousand."

"Is that all? Somehow I thought it would be more."

"Not after we pay all the hospital and doctor bills," Milton would say, "and give the lawyer his half."

"Half! You mean that shyster gets half?"

"Yes. Apparently that's standard when a client doesn't pay a retainer in advance."

"It's robbery!"

"Just another example of exploitation of the less fortunate," Milton would say.

Promptly at three-thirty he would remind her that visiting hours were over, and he would be rid of Lois for another day.

Several times during his confinement, Milton was visited by investigators from the insurance company for the purpose of taking a deposition. Shide would always accompany the men. For their benefit he would invariably admonish Milton to cooperate fully with them.

"Just answer the questions to the best of your ability, Mr. Milton," he would say.

"Yes, of course," Milton would answer, as if no alternative had ever crossed his mind.

"Mr. Milton," the investigator would say, "I believe you stated to your attorney that you made your abrupt stop because a little boy ran in front of your car."

"A little girl," Milton would correct.

"Oh yes, a little girl. Can you describe her for me?"

"I can only tell you that she had blonde hair. It happened very quickly, as you can imagine; I caught only a glimpse of her."

"I see." The investigator, frowning, would make lengthy notes. When he imagined he had taken enough time to make Milton sufficiently nervous and curious, he would look up and force a smile. "Now then," he would continue,

"at the time of the accident you were on your way home from the unemployment office, I believe—"

"Yes. Ironic, too," Milton would say. "It was to have been my last visit."

The investigator would raise his eyebrows. "Oh? Why was that?"

"I had just secured a very lucrative position which I was to have started the following week."

"That is ironic. What was the position?"

"General manager of a sheep ranch. An overseas position in Australia. Paid eighteen thousand a year to start, plus subsidy." Milton would sigh disappointedly. "This back injury was one of the worst pieces of bad luck I've ever had."

His pen poised to write again, the investigator would say, "Mr. Milton, can you give us the name of your prospective employer in Australia so that we can verify your statements?"

"Certainly. MacDuffy was the man's name; Angus MacDuffy."

"And the company's name and address?"

"I'm not sure. You see, the company was just being formed. It was a new venture; the group was buying existing sheep ranches in the back country. Come to think of it, I really *don't* know how you'd contact them." Milton would suddenly close his eyes and let his voice weak-

en and tremble. "Could we finish this another time? I feel very faint—"

And that would be that—until Shide would show up with another one.

After a month Milton found that he had settled rather comfortably into hospital life. Being lazy by nature, he had no problem adjusting to a routine of breakfast in bed, morning whirlpool baths, lunch and gin rummy in the solarium, afternoon naps, watching television while he dined in bed, and electric vibrator massages before he went to sleep. He disliked wearing the neck-and-back brace Dr. Emerson had prescribed, but resigned himself to it with periodic reminders of approximately how much per hour he was earning for his discomfort. Thoughts of the money, of the forty thousand, nearly always made him feel better, and if that didn't work, thinking about Libby Lawlor did. They were, as Milton had planned, becoming very close. After his first month there, she was in the habit of stopping by his room before her shift began.

"Hi," she said as she came in one evening in his seventh week. She handed him some travel folders. "Here are the pamphlets you wanted on Florida. How are you feeling?"

"Hi. Thanks. I'm feeling okay." He looked closely at her for a moment. She seemed to be pouting slightly. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she said.

"Yes, there is, I can tell. What is it?"

"All right. Who's Mrs. Milton? She visited you this afternoon."

Milton forced a smile. "Her name is Lois. She's my brother Melvin's wife. Don't tell me you thought she was married to me!"

"Well—"

"Really, Libby," he chastised mildly. "Come on now, tell me: do I *look* married?"

"You can't blame a girl for wondering," she said half defensively, half apologetically.

"I don't," he said, taking her hand. His voice became sincere. "A girl like you, I guess you must meet all kinds of guys with all kinds of lines. I don't blame you for being careful." He studied her for a moment, then decided to take a long chance. "Look, if you want to, why don't you go down and look at my hospital admittance record—"

"Don't be silly." She slapped his hand lightly, "I believe you. Besides, like you said, you don't *look* married."

They laughed together about it and then Libby squeezed his hand and left to change into her uniform. Fifteen minutes after her shift be-

gan, she was back in Milton's room.

"Sit down a minute, Lib," he said, "I want to talk to you about something."

"Sounds ominous," she kidded, pulling a chair next to the bed. "You're not going to tell me you do have a wife after all?"

"Three of them," he replied. "No, seriously, I've already told you that I was on my way to Florida when the accident happened. I still plan to go down there when my back is okay and I get out of here. I was wondering what you'd think if I asked you to go with me?"

"I'd probably think you were trying to get free nursing service."

"Come on, Lib—"

"Okay, you want to be serious. I'm not sure what I'd say. I'd have to have time to think about it."

"I wish you'd start thinking about it now."

"I really don't know that much about you—"

"There's not that much to know, Lib. Up until a couple of months ago I was just a single guy with a degree in accounting, working as a bank examiner, and living with my brother Melvin and his family. Then one day I decided to strike out for something different. I decided to move to Florida. I quit my job, said good-bye to my brother and his family, and was on my way to the airport when I ended up in

here. Nothing's changed really; it's just been delayed. Oh, there is one difference—my attorney, who's been a friend of the family for years, tells me I might realize a few thousand dollars from the accident. Of course, I already had a little savings of my own. I wasn't going to Florida on a shoestring or anything like that. And with my educational and business background, there's no question of my finding a good position. I don't want you to think I'm boasting, but my last employer offered me a three thousand dollar annual increase not to leave."

"I'm sure you'll do very well in Florida," Libby said. "I'm sure you'd do well anywhere, and I never doubted that you came from a good background. But a girl likes to think about important things before she makes up her mind."

"I understand," Milton said. "But I want you to start thinking about it. Then when the time comes, you'll be able to say yes or no."

"All right." Libby smiled sweetly. "I'll have your answer when you're ready to ask the question."

Two weeks later, he had an unexpected visit from Shide.

"I ran into the insurance company lawyer leaving court yesterday and we stopped for a drink. We discussed your case—strictly off the

record, you understand. I pointed out to him all the plus factors in your favor—the pain and suffering, the loss of a potentially lucrative position in Australia—incidentally, that sheep ranch thing was excellent, excellent. I went on to suggest the very likely probability that Dr. Emerson's prognosis will include future pain and discomfort from the injury. I also mentioned his client's past driving record, and I emphasized that I felt this was one time when a jury might award the maximum amount of the policy—the full hundred thousand."

"And?" Milton asked eagerly.

"He agreed—up to a point. He admitted that we seem to have a pretty solid case, but he felt there were also a couple of negative factors which might carry some weight with a jury."

"Such as?"

"The fact that no one else saw the little girl you say ran in front of your car, and the fact that there's no way of verifying the Australian job."

"Okay, so what was his point?" Milton wanted to know.

"His point was simply that he believes we have a good case—but nowhere near a perfect case."

"Which means?"

"Which means he is in the mood to entertain a settlement out of court if we ask for less than maxi-

mum damages. Otherwise, a trial—”

“You didn’t think we’d get the maximum amount anyway,” Milton reminded him.

“No, but of course *they* don’t know that. My original forecast was around sixty-five thousand. I think that figure, plus hospital expenses through the end of the month, might be accepted if we agreed to sign a waiver of future medical claims. What you have to decide now is whether you want to settle for that or go on to court and try for a possible larger sum.”

“If we settle now, how long will it take to get the money?”

“Not long; ten days, perhaps. It’s just a question of drawing up the agreement, getting the proper signatures, and a day or so for them to issue the check.”

“And I can leave the hospital then?”

“Certainly. As soon as the check is received.”

“Okay,” Milton said without hesitation, “take it.”

After Shide left, Milton looked up a number in the telephone book and placed a call. “Hello, Balducci Tailors? My name is Milton and I’m in Room 407 of Community Hospital. I’ll be ending a rather lengthy convalescence in a couple of weeks and I’d like a man to come by tomorrow and take my measurements for some suits and shirts.”

When he had finished making arrangements with the tailor, Milton called his home. “Hello, Lois. What? No, I didn’t notice what time it is. No, it didn’t even occur to me that I might be interrupting you in the middle of *Where the Heart Is*. I’ll be brief so you won’t miss anything important. I just wanted to tell you not to visit me tomorrow; I’ll be having a special examination by some insurance company orthopedists. What? What do you mean, have they caught me? Lois, I wish you’d watch what you say. There’s nothing to catch me at, remember? Try to keep that in mind. I’ll let you get back to your chocolates now.”

He hung up, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling. What a relief it was going to be when he was rid of Lois for good, and how nice it was going to be with Libby. Of course, it would mean committing bigamy, but who would ever know? Anyway, for sunny Miami, Libby Lawlor, and forty grand, it was worth it.

He looked up another number and placed another call. “Hello, Coast Travel Service? I’d like to have some airline schedules sent over, please . . .”

The deal with the insurance company was consummated in eight days. Shide called him with the news. “The check just arrived by

messenger. The final settlement was for sixty-seven thousand, five hundred. That gives you an even forty-five thousand net. Do you want a cashier's check or would you like me to deposit it for you?"

"I'd like it in cash," Milton said blandly.

"Cash!"

"Yes. Tens, twenties, and fifties. And would you do me a favor? Have your secretary or someone go out and buy a good cowhide attaché case to put the money in."

"Planning to skip the country, are you?" said Shide, more serious than not.

"No, no." Milton forced a chuckle. "I know it's a rather odd request, but what I want to do is check out of the hospital tomorrow morning and go right home and surprise my wife by dumping the whole bundle right in her lap. It's kind of a corny thing to do, I guess, but my wife and I are very close and I haven't done as much for her as I've wanted to do."

Shide was properly touched and agreed to comply with Milton's request. The briefcase of money would be delivered by bonded messenger at nine the following morning.

After Shide hung up, Milton called Balducci Tailors. "I know all of my order isn't ready yet, but I was wondering if I might get one of

the suits and a shirt early tomorrow morning. I have to go across town to a medical clinic for some special tests, and my prehospital clothes fit me so poorly now. I'd certainly appreciate anything you could do to help me."

They promised delivery of his blue Italian silk suit and one of his custom white shirts by eight-thirty. As he hung up, Milton wondered idly what they would do with the other three suits and eleven shirts when they found out he was gone.

The next call he made was to Coast Travel Service. "I'd like two first-class seats on the one o'clock flight to St. Louis tomorrow. I want the tickets sent out C.O.D. in the morning." From St. Louis they could double back to Atlanta, he figured, then go from there to Miami. That way, if Lois *should* try finding him, if she should pick up his trail at the local airport, it would look as if he had headed for California.

The last call he made was to Libby.

"Have you got time to do me a favor before you come to work? I'd like you to stop at a men's wear store and pick me up some sox, a tie, a pair of shoes, and a few other things. I'll pay you for them in the morning, and I'll explain the whole thing to you tonight, okay? Thanks, Lib, I don't know what I'd do with-

out you." He gave her the sizes and told her what colors to get.

Libby came to work early, as usual, and brought his new things to him.

"I'm ready to ask you that question now," he said when she was sitting next to the bed.

Libby smiled. "I'm ready to answer it."

"I'm checking out of here in the morning," Milton told her. "I had planned to go directly to Florida, but I'm going to have to go to St. Louis for a day on business. I want you to come with me, Libby—"

"All right," she said softly, "I will."

Milton squeezed her hand. "You've made me very happy, Lib. There's just one thing: about the trip, I'm going to have to ask you not to mention it to any of the people you work with here. You see, the reason for my having to go to St. Louis is that I'm going to be interviewed there for a job. It's a government job, and it involves pretty strict security. Actually, I shouldn't even be taking you along, but—well, the way I feel about you—"

"I know." She squeezed his hand back. "Listen, I could call the director of nurses tomorrow and say I have to take emergency leave. I can say my sister in Tulsa is ill."

"That's a very good idea," Milton

said with genuine admiration. Having anticipated a certain amount of reluctance on the part of Libby to tell a lie, he now felt considerably relieved that she was going along with him so easily. "Tell you what," he said eagerly, "you make that call about ten-thirty in the morning. That's just about the time I'll be leaving here. Then get your things packed. Take just enough to fill one bag; we'll both do some shopping in St. Louis. I'll pick you up at your apartment at twelve noon sharp."

After Libby left to go on duty, Milton called a rent-a-car firm. He ordered a Cadillac to be delivered to the entrance of the hospital parking lot at ten-thirty the next morning.

The schedule Milton had planned went like clockwork.

He awoke at seven and went into the bathroom to shower and shave. The water felt good on his shoulders and the blade eased along his face more smoothly, it seemed, than it had in years. The day was starting off perfectly.

When he was finished in the bathroom, he put on a clean hospital gown and got back into bed. An orderly brought his breakfast at a quarter of eight, and he ate leisurely, watching the morning news on television. Even the hospital food seemed to taste better than

usual on this morning of mornings.

At eight-thirty a deliveryman from Balducci's sent up his suit, a three-hundred-dollar beauty on a stainless steel hanger in a soft cloth garment bag; and his shirt, a body-fitted, rolled-seamed Oxford cloth creation folded without creases into a deep, tissue-lined box. Milton had them put in the closet with his other things, and sent down a five-dollar tip to the deliveryman with money he had borrowed from Libby the previous night.

Thirty minutes later two bonded messengers arrived with a locked briefcase and an envelope with Shide's return address on it containing the key. Milton had to go down to the lobby and sign in triplicate for the delivery. When he got back to his room, he ripped open the envelope for the key, unlocked the case, and with an odd nervousness raised the lid.

Milton had never seen so much money before. He held his breath for a moment, looking at it. It was neatly bundled and stacked in even rows in tens, twenties, and fifties, just as he had requested it. Milton put the palms of his hands on it, lovingly, as a man touches that which is dearest to him. He wet his lips. Then he began to count.

There were forty bundles in all: ten bundles of fifties, ten bundles of twenties, and twenty bundles of

tens. Fifty bills to the bundle; an even forty-five thousand—

A sudden knock at the door caused Milton's head to snap around anxiously. "Y-yes? Who is it?"

"Floor orderly, Mr. Milton. There's a man at the desk from Coast Travel Service with a C.O.D. envelope for you. He sent the bill up."

Milton snatched a thousand-dollar pack of twenties from the case and snapped it shut. He quickly put it in the closet and opened the door for the orderly.

"How much is it?" he said, looking at the bill. He saw the figure and counted out the amount to the nearest twenty. "There'll be eight bucks change coming," he said. "It's yours for getting that envelope right back up here."

"Yes sir, Mr. Milton!"

The orderly got back with the envelope in six minutes. After he was gone, Milton took out the airline tickets and checked them. They were exactly what he had asked for. *Perfect*, he thought. *Everything is going perfectly.*

He dressed leisurely. The underwear Libby had bought him couldn't have fit better; the sox and tie matched nicely; the shoes didn't even feel stiff on his feet; and the tailor-made shirt and suit made him look like a bank president.

He put five hundred in tens and twenties in his trousers pocket and left the rest of the money in the briefcase. The airlines tickets he put into his inside coat pocket. The only other thing he took with him was his wallet containing his identification. Everything else he'd had with him the day of the accident—pocket comb, an old watch, a cheap ring Lois had given him for his birthday, the clothes he had been wearing—he simply left behind. *Everything from now on, he thought happily, is going to be brand new!*

At exactly twenty past ten, briefcase in hand, Milton walked out of the room, along the corridor, down the stairs, and out of the hospital. He didn't even bother to check out at the desk. By the time they missed him—at one o'clock when they went around collecting the lunch trays—he would be twenty-five thousand feet in the air, having a drink with a peaches-and-cream blonde at his side.

He walked to the hospital parking lot entrance and found a new rental Cadillac waiting for him. The driver, who unhooked a small return car from the rear, had the rental agreement ready to sign. Milton showed the man his driver's license and paid a fifty-dollar deposit.

"I'll check the car back in at your airport desk soon."

"That'll be fine, Mr. Milton. Here are the keys, sir."

"Thanks," Milton said. He straightened his posture slightly; it felt good to be called *sir*. He tipped the driver five dollars.

The big car felt good under him as he drove leisurely across town to the address Libby Lawlor had given him. The briefcase lay flat on the seat beside him, and periodically he rested one hand on it in casual possessiveness. He whistled softly as he drove.

When he arrived, he found that Libby lived in a neat gray stone apartment building. He rang the bell and climbed the stairs two at a time to her floor, swinging the briefcase jauntily at his side while keeping a tight grip.

She met him at the door, smiling. "Hi, you're early."

"Hi, I'm anxious." He followed her into the apartment.

"I'm almost ready. How does it feel to be out and around?"

"Great, great." He sat down, holding the briefcase on his knees. Libby glanced at it.

"You travel light, don't you?"

Milton shrugged. "As long as we're making a new start, it might as well be from scratch."

"That's the way to go, all right; if you can afford it."

"We can afford it, Lib," he said. He patted the briefcase mean-

ingly. "We can afford anything."

Libby smiled, her peaches-and-cream cheeks seeming almost to glow. She closed a small overnight bag on the couch. "Okay, love."

They left the apartment arm in arm, Milton carrying the briefcase and Libby's bag in one hand.

"I'm not sure how to get to the airport from here," he said when they were in the car.

"This side of town is kind of behind the airport," she told him. "Just go up to Hester Road and turn left; it takes you right in by the back gate."

Milton followed her directions. He found Hester Road to be a section of the old main highway. It ran directly beside and below the freeway, and its surface was badly pitted.

"Not a very good road," Milton commented.

"No, but the traffic is light," Libby said, looking at the deserted road up ahead.

"That depends on your point of view," Milton said. "A moving van has been on my rear bumper for the past two blocks—"

"Milton, look out!" Libby yelled, pointing off to their left. A shaggy gray cat was darting into the street in front of them. Milton stomped down hard on the powerful brakes. They caught and stopped the car instantly—and a split second later

the big moving van crashed into them from the rear.

Milton, who had not bothered to fasten his seat belt, was whiplashed forward brutally; his head flopped to one side grotesquely. Libby, buckled in, was barely shaken by the impact. She turned to look at the van behind them. The driver appeared to be unconscious, slumped forward across the steering wheel.

Libby released her seat belt and got out of the car. She looked up and down the street. There was no traffic in either direction. Quickly she ran around the car and opened the door on the driver's side. Milton was lying back against the seat, an incredulous look on his face. His mouth was partly open, his eyes wide and staring, his body absolutely still.

"Can you speak?" Libby asked him.

He did not answer.

"Can you move? Can you feel anything? Blink your eyes if you can feel anything."

Milton remained absolutely still.

Libby frowned. "You mean you can't even blink?" She sighed quietly. "Quadriplegia," she said. "You're paralyzed."

Libby straightened and looked down the street again.

"There's an underpass about two blocks down; it leads over to a

boulevard on the other side of the freeway. There'll probably be someplace over there that has a phone." She looked back at Milton. "I can call a taxi to take me the rest of the way to the airport."

Libby reached into his inside coat pocket and took the airline tickets. From the floorboard of the car, where it had been thrown, she retrieved the briefcase. Opening the rear door, she leaned in over the back seat and began transferring the money into her suitcase.

"Too bad it had to happen this way, Milton," she said philosophically. "But then it *does* save me the trouble of giving you a sedative in some St. Louis hotel room and sneaking off with the money in the middle of the night."

She shut her bag again, leaving the briefcase empty on the back

seat. Before she left, Libby paused next to the open front door.

"Incidentally, love," she said, "I did check your hospital admittance record. I found out about Lois. It's too bad—if you had told me the truth I'd have still gone with you, only then we'd have been partners. This way it's everyone for himself. Good-bye, Milton."

She walked away from the car, her peaches-and-cream face passing from his field of view. He heard the click of her high heels on the concrete for a minute or so, but gradually they faded away with distance. Then he was alone. His motionless eyes continued to stare; but now there was nothing to see. Everything was gone.

He wished very much that he could close his eyes. But not even that was left.

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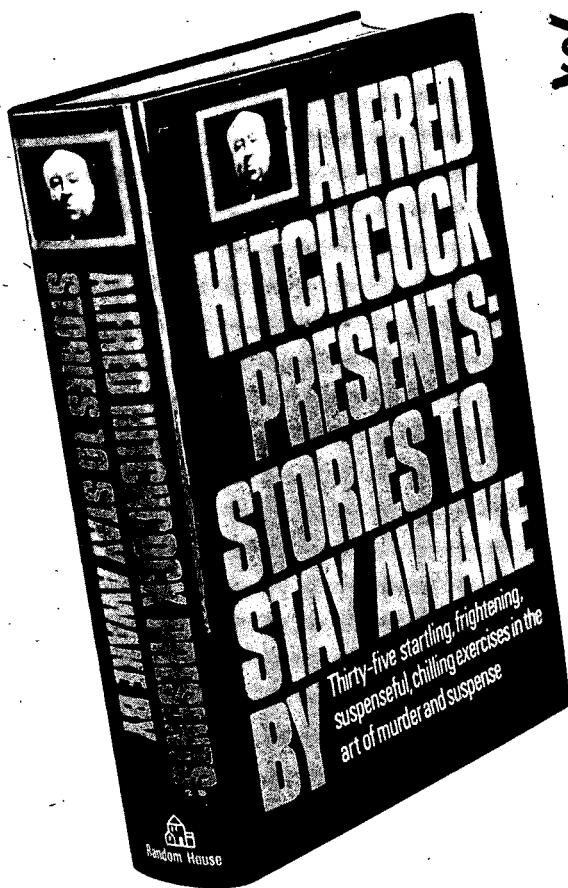
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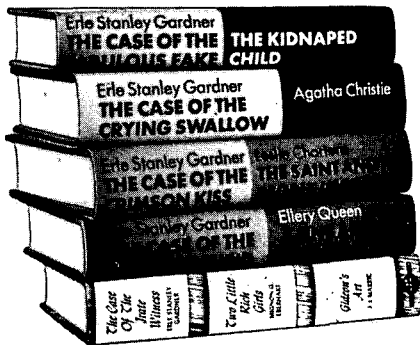
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